The Thunder God

Peter B. Kyne

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BEN WHITTON POUNDED HIS DESK. "MEETING WILL COME TO ORDER," HE ANNOUNCED.

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THE THUNDER GOD

A Romantic Story of Love, Hatred and Adventure

By

PETER B. KYNE

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KINDRED OF THE DUST
THE ENCHANTED HILL
CAPPY RICKS, ETC.

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Benjamin Whitton signed the last of a stack of letters and pressed the call button to summon his secretary. He was looking at the clock when she entered.

"Eleven o'clock, Gloria," he confided. "Better get those letters in the mail and then vamose. It's Saturday, and in all probability I shall not need you again until Monday morning. *Heraus mit* you."

"I'm in no hurry, Ben," Gloria Justin replied. "Something might bob up before we close at one."

"If it does, it can bob down again, Gloria. You've worked extra hard all this week, so take a leaf out of my book and as the bird of time flies over you snatch a tail feather or two. How would you like to take a gallop in the park this afternoon?"

The girl's face lighted pleasurably. "I'd love it. With you, of course," she added.

"No, alone. I have a horse out at the academy, and he requires exercise."

"So do you, Ben."

"You're presuming to argue with your easy-going employer and ancient friend. I have other plans for this afternoon—and if you were the really kind-

hearted girl you've always posed as being, you'd exercise my horse for me."

"Oh, I will—gladly."

"Thanks. I'll phone the riding academy to have him ready for you at, say, two o'clock. I'm hung up here. Julian Grannis is calling."

"Indeed! I didn't know Julian was in town."

"Neither do I! I merely have a premonition he's going to call. I'm acting on it."

"How remarkable!"

"Nothing at all remarkable about telepathy. It's always been that way with Julian and me. Julian's mighty brain sends out an SOS for his old pal, and Old Pal never fails him as a receiving station. Julian's in trouble."

"How do you know, Ben?"

"Because I never receive his telepathic SOS unless he is. It may not be serious trouble, but it is of sufficient importance to him to cause him to wish to talk it over with me."

"I hope it hasn't to do with Mercedes, Ben?"

"I hope it has. Sooner or later Julie's going to have trouble with that wife of his, and the sooner the better, says old Ben Whitton, flicking the ashes from his cigar."

"Poor Julian!"

Mr. Whitton lighted a cigar preparatory to flicking the ashes from it, then leaned back in his swivel chair and fixed his glance on the chandelier. "Funny about Julian and me," he resumed. "The first time I had a telepathic message from him I was down in Sonora putting in an irrigation system for some American

interests there. Julian was in Peru on a job for a big copper mine up in the Andes. All day long I had been bothered by a feeling that he wanted to get in touch with me and talk things over. So finally I cabled him: 'Well, get it off your chest. What do you want me to do?' "

Ben Whitton smiled reminiscently. "That was shortly after we had got into the World War. Back came Julie's answer: 'Want you wait for me stop then we'll enlist together in the same regiment stop starting home to-morrow.'

"Well, I waited for the boy. By the time he reached San Francisco I was all cleaned up in Sonora, so we each secured a captaincy in an engineer regiment and went across. Julian's digestion had gone wrong in Peru, and I discovered he was subject to attacks of acute indigestion. The jackdaw never would take care of himself, so I tucked away in my kit a can of bicarbonate of soda—acute indigestion can kill a man, you know, while one is thinking of sending for the doctor. Well, we were billeted in the same château. One night I awakened from a very sound sleep with the thought that Julian had just called me in terror and distress. I listened but heard no outcry and decided I had been dreaming. However, I couldn't go to sleep without making certain, so I popped into Julian's room, and there lay the idiot, all tied up in knots.

" 'Julian,' I demanded, 'did you call me?'

" 'No,' he replied. 'I wanted to, but it seemed indecent to disturb your slumbers. It's that confounded indigestion again.'

"So I mixed him a bicarbonate of soda highball and relieved him.

"In the Meuse-Argonne show he got knocked over and fell into a ditch among some bushes. He couldn't get out, and nobody came for him. But all night long he kept sending out his SOS for me, and I couldn't come. He was in that ditch three days, and all the time I knew he was alive, although listed as missing, which, in the case of a company commander, means, usually, that the missing one is dead. When we were relieved, I went looking for him. Went straight to him like a setter after a dead bird, and got cussed for my pains. And now he's in trouble again. I feel it. But since he hasn't communicated with me, I know he's coming to see me, so I'll wait here."

"But he knows you will not be in your office after one o'clock on Saturday, Ben."

"He knows, my dear, that I'll be here when he wants me. It will never occur to him to remember this is Saturday. In all probability he thinks to-day is Sunday. Most forgetful man I have ever known." Ben Whitton sighed. "And I did want to go riding this afternoon."

A shadow darkened the ground-glass panel of Whitton's private office. Somebody knocked. "That's the old horse thief," Whitton declared positively.

"I'll bet you a dollar it isn't," Gloria Justin challenged.

"You cannot afford to bet a dollar so recklessly, my dear, and I am not sufficiently grasping to permit you to lose it. Of course, that's Julian Grannis. Anybody else would go to the door of the general office.

But Julian's a direct creature. He's got me on his mind to the exclusion of everything else; he always cuts across lots to his objectives. Open the door, if you please, Gloria."

The girl drew the door open and stepped back with it, thus shielding herself from the visitor's gaze. "Hello, Butch," she heard him say.

"Come in, Julian," Ben Whitton called. "I've been expecting you."

"Still the same old warlock. I'm glad you waited. Thanks."

They shook hands, and then Julian Grannis looked across at the door which Whitton's secretary was closing. "Why, hello, Gloria," he saluted her, his voice resonant with genuine pleasure. "What are you doing here, opening doors for Ben Whitton?" He leaped up and ran across the room to her with eager hands outstretched.

"It's so good to see you again, Julian. I'm Ben's secretary."

"Oh!" And that was all of his comment. He held her hands an appreciable moment, gazing down at her with a pleased little-boy expression. "It's a delight to meet you again, Gloria."

"Proves there's some balm in Gilead, after all," Ben Whitton interjected.

Julian Grannis released her hands with seeming reluctance, and stood lost in admiration. "We don't meet often enough, Gloria," he asserted. "This wicked world is always coming between one and one's old friends. Sit down, Gloria, and let's have a little visit."

"Some other time, Julian. I'm a business woman now and may not sit down and visit with the boss' friends when they call—at least not in the boss' office. Besides, I'm through for the day and am off on pleasure bound."

"But I shall see you on Monday, of course?"

"In the next office." She nodded to both men and left. Julian Grannis gazed at the door a few seconds after it had closed behind her, then turned his head toward Whitton and, with an inquiring look, jerked it back again in the direction of the door.

"Old Justin blew up," Whitton replied. "Sunk three dry oil wells and couldn't pay for sinking the third. Now he's where the ivy doth entwine. Cirrhosis of the liver—worry. Gloria had to do something, so she went to a secretarial school and then came and asked me to help her find a job. Ordinarily it's awkward to have an old friend for a secretary, but trust Gloria to understand. She's a whiz bang."

"You're a good old hunks, Ben. Always were, for that matter."

Ben Whitton shoved his humidor across the desk.

"Well," he commanded, "sing a song or tell the story. What trouble are you in now?"

Julian Grannis looked at his friend. He beheld a large man in the early thirties: a man with large freckled hands with hair on the back of them; a man with a heavy stern face; a man with a fighter's jaw and humorous eyes that nevertheless, for all their humorous glint, bored into one determinedly. He sat straight up in his chair, alert, seemingly ready for a spring at anything that might invite being sprung at.

His hair was thick and ruddy brown—more red than brown.

Grannis hesitated an appreciable period, and Ben Whitton leaned a little forward. "Money? How much? I have some."

Grannis shook his head.

"Domestic?" Whitton leaned forward and placed his elbows on his desk.

"Partially."

"Tell Father!" The humorous gleam in the dark brown eyes increased. "How's Mercedes?"

"Oh, no change." Julian spoke in the mild tone of one who expects no change and is slightly amazed to think that anyone might. "I'm liable to have the battle of the century with Mercedes," he added regretfully.

"Well, I think that will be interesting—provided you'll fight. You dislike battle so."

"Yes, that's true. Fighting's foolish. Ben, I'm going to change my base."

Ben Whitton looked mildly interested. "Divorce?"

"Good Lord, no. I've quit my job, old-timer!"

"That's serious, unless you have another and a better one. Have you?"

"All through working for the other fellow, Ben. I've learned all I wanted to learn as general superintendent for the Western Sierras Power Company. I've quite. I'm a capitalist."

"Well, I'm listening, Julian."

"A year ago my Uncle Jarlath popped off. You didn't know I had an Uncle Jarlath, did you? Well, neither did I until his executor got on my trail. Uncle

Jarlath was a country banker in Missouri. He doted on eight per cent and deeds of trust. Well, he left me all he had to leave. The estate was settled last week and, after selling out everything, the executor mailed me a certificate of deposit for $652,408.02 United States gold of the present standard of weight and fineness. Need any money, Ben? See your Uncle Julie if you do!"

"Thanks, I do not. You're going to give me that money to take care of for you? You'd better. If you don't, some low white man will take it all away from you, Julie."

"Aren't you glad I'm rich?" Grannis complained.

"Why should I be glad? You could never be anything but rich, old son, because you were born without a sense of material values. A fifty-dollar suit of ready-made clothing pleases you quite as well as a hundred-and-fifty-dollar suit made to order by the best tailor in town! You regard clothing merely as something with which to cover your nakedness. With ten dollars in your pocket, you're as rich as you're ever going to be with Uncle Jarlath's hard-won dinero; so I fail to see why I should enthuse over your windfall. Of course, it will mean a great deal to Mercedes."

Julian squirmed slightly. "That's where the shoe pinches. It isn't going to mean anything to her."

"Of course it will. I know Mercedes better than you do."

His visitor shook a tousled head. "No, Ben. It isn't going to mean anything to her because I haven't told her anything about it, and I'm not going to."

Ben Whitton sat up very straight. "Well, what a savage brute old dog Tray has turned out to be! If you'll take my advice, you'll tell her. She'll never forgive you such decepiton. Few wives would," he added parenthetically. "Avoid trouble and tell her, Julie."

Grannis clasped a thin knee in his long, thin, good-looking hands. "I'll be in trouble if I don't tell her, and I'll be in trouble if I do. She'll have plans," he added darkly. "Oh, all sorts of plans."

"I daresay. Although a single man myself, I've always heard that women enjoy planning things."

"Well, I have plans of my own, Ben."

"Shoot, Luke, or give up the gun," Whitton urged cryptically.

"I've always wanted a laboratory where I could work out some theories regarding the long-distance high-tension transmission of hydroelectric energy.

"The General Electric Company or the Westinghouse people might be induced to provide you with one, if you can convince them that you have a sound theory to work out. They are aware of your standing in your profession."

"No, they're endowing colleges for that purpose. Besides, I want a free hand. So I'm going to put in a plant of my own and fuss with it in my own way."

"You will, in all probability, spend your six hundred-odd before you solve your problem," the astute Whitton warned him. "Then you'll have to put your trunk on your back again and go looking for another job."

"Well, I can do that if I have to. See here, Ben, I'm set on this plan, and I can't have Mercedes vetoing it.

What she doesn't know will not trouble her. Besides, I'm not going to invest all my money in experiments. It wouldn't be fair to force Mercedes to pinch and scrape all her days. No, it wouldn't be fair."

"What salary have you been earning, Julie, since you went to work for the Western Sierra people?"

"Five hundred a month, a nice house to live in, free telephone, fuel, automobile and automobile expense."

"How much money have you saved the past two years?"

"None."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Mercedes couldn't stand the mountain life. And I do not blame her. We lived in Madrone, which is a good-sized sawmill town about a mile from the power house, but the people there were dull and uninteresting——"

"Not to you, Julie."

"Of course not. Almost any kind of human being interests me. But to a woman raised as Mercedes has been raised——"

"Yes," I understand, Julie. So Mercedes has been living in San Francisco?"

"No, Los Angeles. I managed to get down to see her over the week-ends about once a month. And of course one cannot maintain two establishments and expect to save any money. I didn't blame Mercedes, and I'm not blaming her now, you understand. To a woman of culture and refinement——"

"I understand perfectly. Where are you going to install your laboratory?"

"Somewhere on the outskirts of this city. I'll find an old deserted factory or brewery—cheap rent, you know."

"Mercedes will, of course, rejoin you when she knows you are going to live in San Francisco."

"She has already done so. She's at the hotel now."

"That's comforting to you, I daresay. And you have told her you are going to do—what?"

Julian Grannis smiled with a sort of little-boy wickedness. "I've told her I'm going into business with you, Ben. Whitton & Grannis, Civil and Electrical Engineers."

Ben Whitton smiled a little wistfully. "That is an association I have always wanted, Julie, but I fear it will not work out successfully."

"Oh, this is only going to be a theoretical partnership, Ben. It will not have to work out in practice. Just a blind to keep Mercedes off my trail, you understand, until I've worked out my problem of the high-tension transmission of hydroelectric energy over unlimited distance with practically no loss of energy in transit.

"If she should telephone, you can tell her I'll be back in five minutes and you'll have me call her up. Then you can telephone me at my digs and instruct me to telephone her. If you help me, Ben, she'll never know what I've been up to, and if I win I'll be a multi-millionaire and she'll forgive me when she finds me out; if, on the other hand, I lose, she'll never know how close she came to doing a lot of planning. Am I your partner, Ben?"

"You know you are, Julie. I'll be your phonograph

and your camouflage. At that, many opportunities will come through this office to bring you fat fees as a consulting engineer."

"Don't want 'em," Julie answered plaintively. "Not," he added, "until my money's all gone. Time enough to wear a collar again then." He drew a rectangular piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to his friend. "That's my fortune, Ben. Put it in your safe. Every time Mercedes sends my clothes out to the cleaners she goes through my pockets, of course —and I can never tell when she'll take a notion that my clothes require pressing and cleaning. She has to have everything just so."

"Well, she'll never succeed in having you just so," Ben Whitton rejoined with faint bitterness. "So that's all of your trouble, Julie?"

Julie nodded, hugely pleased with himself.

"Of course," Whitton, the practical, assured him, "you can make that legacy pay you five per cent net with safety—thirty thousand a year at least. That's a lot of money for you, boy friend. Almost too much. Before embarking upon this laboratory scheme, I'd think long and hard if I were you. You have here the means with which to live in ease and comfort the remainder of your days."

"I couldn't stand idleness, Ben."

"Well, work if you must, but don't work too hard. Will you and Mercedes dine with me to-night, Julie?"

"Sorry, old man, but I suggested the same thing to Mercedes this morning. She was so sorry, but she had already accepted an invitation for us to dine with some friends of hers from Los Angeles."

"Well, then, some night next week. Julie, I hate to chase you out, but I think I have time to ride a few hours in the park this afternoon. You'll lunch with me, of course?"

"Of course. Come to think of it, I'm hungry too. I was so busy this morning I forgot to eat breakfast."

Ben Whitton chuckled softly. How like Julie it was (he reflected) to forget to eat breakfast and only remember it when luncheon was suggested! He locked the draft in his safe, and, as he spun the combination, queried:

"Who's your banker?"

"Haven't got any, old son. Never have had. Mercedes does the banking for the Grannis family."

"That is, she has heretofore."

"Exactly."

"Hum-m-m! Julie, I doubt if you'll want to be bothered keeping your own accounts at that laboratory. You'll have to write letters, too, from time to time. You'll keep your accounts in this office, and Gloria Justin will be your secretary. For this you will pay her a moderate salary, which she can use nicely. Understood?"

"Delighted."

"I appoint myself your general manager. Where the other fellow's money is to be spent you are a combination of French peasant, Levantine Jew and Armenian, but where your own money is concerned you are very careless and liberal. When you make your lease, take me into your confidence. You're the greatest electrical engineer in the world, Julie, but that lets

you out. In all other affairs, you're the natural and inevitable receiver of gold bricks."

"Yes, sir. Any further remarks, sir? I love to have you patronize me. Of course, I know you're a leader of men and thoroughly at home in the company of roughnecks on a hard, dirty job, but—I wasn't such a terrible frost in France was I?"

"Your men followed you because they loved you. They feared to let you out of their sight, on the supposition that if they did something would happen to you."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Perhaps, although I doubt it. Nevertheless, you're going to have volunteers for that duty as long as you live. However, let's quit talking about you. How is Mercedes?"

"Oh, fine, fine."

"How does she accept the news that you're going into business with me?"

"Well, not so good, Ben. She thinks, perhaps, I'll not make as much money on my own as I would on a general superintendent's salary."

"She's right. Was she unconvinced when you left her a little while ago?"

"Not at all. Not an iota, my dear inquisitor. She's forbidden the banns."

"You expect to talk her out of it, of course?"

Julie heaved a small sigh. "No, I'm tired of using moral persuasion, Ben. I'm just going to do my job in my own way hereafter. I'm just a trifle weary of being managed, even by those who love me and mean well by me."

"You ungrateful pup! Of course, you realize that a revolution is treason until it succeeds, when it becomes the purest patriotism."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to revolute, Ben. Why not? Haven't I got the sinews of war? Leadership is man's natural prerogative in family life, and whether his leadership be good or bad, still, if he's worthy of being a husband, he's worthy of being trusted to produce the wherewithal to support his family decently. Until Uncle Jarlath's executor got on my trail, I never gave this matter any consideration, being too busy with other things, but of late I've developed a philosophical streak."

"Impossible! Julie, what you've developed is the stubborn streak which emerges so surprisingly in the mildest and most agreeable of men. But don't try getting stubborn with me, you devil. You'll agree to my dictatorship without question."

Julie smiled at his friend. "At any rate, it will be a benevolent dictatorship, old hard-head! Such are easy to stand. When do we eat?"

CHAPTER II

When Gloria Justin arrived at the riding academy, she found Ben Whitton awaiting her there. "Got rid of Julie," he explained, "so I concluded to exercise my own horse. I have hired one for you. Let's go."

They had ridden halfway through Golden Gate Park before Ben Whitton spoke to the girl again. "It's a very great shame, Gloria, that you never married Julie."

"He didn't ask me," she reminded him, and gave him a sharp, swift sidelong glance. But he was immersed in his profound thoughts, his somewhat gloomy gaze fixed on the horizon.

"The worm," he said presently, "is beginning to turn."

"Meaning what?"

"Don't dissemble with me, of all men, Gloria. He's tiring of his wife's domination. Julian Grannis and I have known each other intimately since the days when he carried a morning newspaper route and I worked for the local butcher on Saturdays and thereby earned the nickname of Butch. But I do not know the man. Sometimes I think I do, and just about the time I'm proud in my own conceit, he does something that disproves all my carefully collected theories regarding him. I never thought he'd revolt on Mercedes—hence I'll never trust him again! There's only one

person in this world who never has any doubts as to Julie, and that's his wife. She knows him from soul to vermiform appendix—yes, she does *not!*"

They rode another half mile in silence. A faint smile that fringed the man's strong mouth gradually broadened until at last he turned to Gloria with a chuckle. "Don't disappoint me, Gloria," he begged. "Don't shatter my faith in my own tremendous understanding of womankind. Haven't you any curiosity at all regarding Julie and his wife?"

"Regarding Julie—yes. Regarding Mercedes—none. I know all about Mercedes."

"Well, what do you know?"

"That she isn't as Spanish as her name would imply, for instance."

"Named herself after an automobile, eh? I suppose she thought the name fitted her complexion."

"Her father was a sea captain—a Norwegian brunette who married an Irishwoman. Good, decent stock for the upbuilding of a democracy. They saved their money and invested it shrewdly, and when they died—they were both drowned in a wreck when Mercedes, known then as Nora, was ten years old—they left an estate of some $50,000 in trust for their child and to be turned over to her when she should attain the age of eighteen. The income took care of Nora nicely. She went to a finishing school in the East, and when she returned she was quite capable of doing anything except earning a living. And she had to do that very promptly, for it appears her fortune was represented practically in its entirety by stock in a shipping company which went into bankruptcy about

that time. There being no more dividends, Nora—I mean Mercedes—married Julian Grannis."

"Hum-m! How do you know all this? First I ever heard of it."

"That's because I'm not usually a gossip. And I went to the same convent as Nora Lindberg."

"Know her pretty well, eh?"

"I said I knew all about her, not that I know her. Why should I? I have had no opportunity. Although one of Julie's oldest friends—and we used to be very dear friends—I was not invited to his wedding. Subsequently, he expressed his disappointment at not seeing me there, so I realized it wasn't his fault and that the list of friends he desired invited had been edited. I pleaded illness to Julie. Is Julie happy, Ben?"

"I think so. Not particularly unhappy, at any rate. I imagine he senses, occasionally, in a vague way, that he is more or less inhibited, that he is treated as if he were a little boy. But he's mad about Mercedes."

"I hope Mercedes is devoted to him, Ben. Julie needs something more than a wife. He should have a combination wife-trained-guardian-mother-confessor-guide-philosopher and friend."

"I don't know what he has, Gloria, but I suspect he hasn't got all of that. And I never knew a man who had. I think, however, that Mercedes is reasonably fond of her husband, although I doubt if she could ever think quite as much of Julie as she does of herself. After she has helped herself, she's perfectly willing that he should have what's left."

"You must know her rather well."

"No, but I know her type. Since the day she married Julie, she has, in a quiet but devilishly efficient manner, managed to keep him from associating very much with his old friends. She has the collie-dog instinct for herding her husband. Perhaps she's the possessive type. I have never been to Julie's house for dinner, nor has he ever been able to induce his wife to accept an invitation to my house for dinner. She doesn't decline, of course. She's gracious and friendly and so regretful—but there's always a headache or a prior engagement. . . . Well, I understand. So I have given up the idea. Let's canter the next half mile or so."

When they resumed their conversation, Whitton told her of Julian's legacy, of his secret plans, which, under no circumstances, must be revealed to his wife.

"You're right, Ben. The worm *is* turning," was the girl's sole comment.

"I wish he'd go to the assault and have it over with. I do not relish his fear of Mercedes."

"Is it fear of Mercedes or is it a great craving for peace, Ben?"

"Perhaps the latter. He has some half-baked theories in electric induction he desires to work out, and I daresay, if Mercedes knew that he had over $650,000, he'd find himself engaged in discussions about money matters—which is something he isn't interested in. Yes, undoubtedly she'd cramp his style, although she'd never realize it or admit it. Perhaps Julie knows his own business better than I do. I admit I'm prejudiced in his favor . . . the idiot never should have married. He is a dreamer, a poet, a crea-

tive artist—marriage destroys such men. They never quite fulfill their early promise—at least while they remain tame husbands like Julie."

Gloria had no answer to this masculine philosophy, since her own, being feminine, conflicted with it. She had always believed Ben Whitton to be predestined to bachelorhood. She had no difficulty in visualizing him as a lovable and faithful friend, but as a lover she suspected the rôle would still have been subservient to that of friend.

While, as she told Ben Whitton, she was well acquainted with the early history of Mercedes Grannis, Gloria hadn't the slightest idea as to what sort of woman the girl she had known at fourteen had developed into. She would not even hazard a guess, for she knew age and experience of life softens people. She remembered only that, as a little girl, Nora Lindberg was a beauty. But Gloria would have included her in the list of the less popular at the convent. She was selfish; she had more spending money than the other girls and in a little locker at the foot of her bed in the dormitory she kept candy which she ate secretly at night, never offering any even to her intimate friends. She had instinctive good taste in dress and was distinctly imperious in her demeanor toward others, even her teachers.

In her studies she appeared contented with mere passing marks; she had a sweet voice and played the violin very well for one of her age; except in the matter of violin practice, she was indolent and had no taste for athletics or youthful games.

When she was sixteen, Gloria Justin first met Julian

Grannis. It was during her freshman year at Leland Stanford and Julian, who had been graduated as an electrical engineer at the age of twenty, had returned to the university at twenty-six for some postgraduate work under the famous Professor Ryan. He had been one of Professor Ryan's most promising pupils, and after six years in the practice of his profession, he had returned to sit again at the feet of the master. He was a tall young man, slim almost to the point of spareness, his ordinarily fair complexion finely bronzed by the heat and snows of far-distant places. When Gloria was introduced to him at a dance given by his old fraternity, he looked gravely down at her with the eyes of a dreamer, a visionary, an idealist.

She saw much of him during that semester; he developed a habit of meeting her accidently, and once he begged permission to drive her up to San Francisco in a villainous old cheap roadster. She invited him to her home for dinner that night, and her parents liked him greatly. Her father declared him a queer duck, but sound and likable. Through him she met Ben Whitton, who had been graduated in the same class with him. Whitton had come into the city, following the completion of a canal-digging job down in the San Joaquin Valley, and was out of employment.

Then Julian went away to Peru, and at parting had the temerity to ask her to kiss him good-by. And that old-fashioned deference she liked, for she had met many youths who essayed that privilege sans permission.

So Gloria kissed him—and suddenly found herself

in his arms and sensed that he was trembling. "I don't want to leave you, Gloria," he murmured. "I've never met a girl like you before. It hurts so to leave you. You'll not forget me, will you, Gloria? I'm not a very social animal, and I don't suppose I'll ever get very far in the world—I'm not that kind, you know—can't bear the push and shove and battle that seems to be necessary for a fellow to indulge in nowadays if he expects to get along, but——"

And there he paused, embarrassed, his utterance choked by a flood of feeling. And then Gloria knew that she loved this young man who was so different; knew too that he loved her and dared not confess it. Ah, yes, he was poor! His clothing was demoded and cheap, his sole resources the undoubted intelligence that shone in his wistful eyes. . . .

"Ill not forget you, Julie," she promised. "Do you want me to write to you?"

His eyes were wide with wonder and appreciation. "If you'll be so kind. It will be lonely down there, and your letters will help." Then he kissed her suddenly, fiercely, passionately and she commenced to weep . . . he kissed away her tears, his hands awkwardly smoothing back the hair from her cheeks, the while he looked at her hungrily and said: "You're such a sweet girl. You'll have many beaus, Gloria . . . but I'll come back. It's a two-year contract, and it means a lot to me. Perhaps then——"

But again he resolutely conquered his desire. Quite soberly he said, "Good-by, sweetheart," and hurried out of the house.

They corresponded, but not as avowed lovers.

From Peru he came home to go to the war; was in San Francisco a day and they lunched together; then he went east to a mobilization camp with Ben Whitton . . . she had never even seen him in a uniform, and that had been a deprivation, for he returned to San Francisco from the war and appeared again before her arrayed in civilian clothes, the mold of fashion and the glass of form.

He explained to her without reservation that Ben Whitton had selected his raiment for him, and with juvenile pride pirouetted before her and found great joy in her appreciation of his appearance. He limped a little, but did not tell her he had been wounded; of his service he had nothing to say, but of Ben Whitton's he was voluble almost to the point of boasting. Later she discovered he had been awarded the D. S. C., a Croix de Guerre with palms, the cross of the Legion of Honor and the D. S. O. of the British Empire. But this she learned from Ben Whitton.

She saw him several times during the succeeding week; they lunched and went to a matinée together. Then the necessity of finding a job became paramount, and he went away. And this time he did not ask her to remember him; he mentioned nothing of the pleasure a letter from her would afford him, nor did he kiss her good-by. He was the devoted friend, nothing more.

A long time after he had gone, and when the ache of disappointment had been, in a measure, dulled by time, she learned that he had met a girl named Mercedes Lindberg in France. She had been an enter-

tainer in the Y—singing and playing the violin.

Presently, Gloria learned from Ben Whitton that Julian was in town again, and one night she saw him at the theater with Nora Lindberg. Later he married her, and from Ben Whitton Gloria learned he had gone to Madrone as field superintendent of the Western Sierras Power Company.

Gloria was a prideful young woman; she was no weakling. Resolutely, she set herself to the task of forgetting Julian Grannis, nor did she entertain for him the slightest resentment; she felt no bitterness in her defeat. After all, they had never been engaged. It was merely one of those things that might have been; she was young, and time cures all hurts.

She had been quite assured he was out of her mind forever until they met two years later. Then Gloria suspected that, in all probability, he would never be out of her mind; as she cantered along the park bridle path now with Ben Whitton she knew for a certainty that, even though opportunity had been denied her and Julie to permit their mutual attraction to burgeon into love that could weather the vicissitudes that love is heir to, nevertheless it had been for her the grand passion of her life.

And yet not for this lost love did her heart ache, but for the object of it. Poor Julie! He so thoroughly deserved happiness. And it pained her to reflect that possibly he was not getting it—at least in the full measure he deserved.

After parting with Ben Whitton at the Palace Hotel, Julian Grannis caught a Market Street trolley and rode to the ferry, where he left the car and turned

north along the Embarcadero. From dock to bulkhead he wandered, pausing to gaze, with juvenile curiosity, at bumptious little tugboats shouldering liners into their berths; at stevedores trundling truckloads of merchandise up to a steamer's cargo slings; at launches darting out to the battleships at the naval achorage. At Lombard Street, he found a little South Sea trading schooner discharging copra and made friends with the mate, who gave him a pineapple.

Continuing his stroll, he came to Fisherman's Wharf, and spent an hour looking at the blue-and-white-hulled trawlers with their Neapolitan crews; he fraternized with an old man mending a brown seine, ate a large crab freshly boiled in a huge caldron outside the fish market and decided that life was good—if only he didn't have to go back to the hotel and explain to Mercedes where he had been since leaving her and what he had done. She would laugh when he told her—and of late her mirthless, somewhat sardonic little chuckles at his vagaries had commenced to irk him. He wished he didn't have to go back for quite a while; he would have liked to rent a drop line, purchase some bait and fish for shiners off the dock as he and Ben Whitton had been wont to do away back in the purple twilight of the long ago.

Good old Ben! He had been very successful. Why, he had a suite of four offices—one for himself, one for Gloria, a general office that housed his bookkeeper and estimate clerk and a drafting room with two draftsmen. There was a vacant office at the end of Ben's suite, and Ben had told him he could rent that. Of course he'd have to furnish it even though he never

occupied it. . . . He wondered what bank Ben Whitton would decide to deposit the draft in. His own bank, probably. A new account of that magnitude would put Ben in right with his bank—probably stiffen the old boy's credit. Ben was smart. He thought of such things. Dear old Ben! Why, he had offered Julie a loan, not knowing that his friend was rich! But that was Ben all over. Homely old car horse! He could always be depended upon to see to the heart of a situation without the aid of a blue print.

Well, he was glad he had put a bridle on his tongue that day he went to Peru—that day he had almost forgotten he was a penniless nobody. Undoubtedly, Gloria had been mighty fond of him in those days, but, thank Heaven, she had been too young to suspect the profundity of his feeling toward her. Puppy love! People soon got over puppy love! He had. Undoubtedly Gloria had had many a little *affaire de cœur* since then. Strange she had not married. If Ben Whitton had sense enough to pound sand in a rat hole, he would ask her to marry him . . . dull dog, Ben, in some ways.

He walked back along the Embarcadero and took a trolley uptown to the modest little "family" hotel where Mercedes awaited him. He was sensible of a slight feeling of depression as he entered the elevator; he had a premonition of impending unpleasantness. Not a domestic spat, of course—Mercedes was too well bred for that sort of thing, thank God—but an atmosphere surcharged with misunderstanding and lack of sympathy. Lord, he wished he had the knack of pleasing her, of refraining from doing the things that set

her nerves on edge and brought a cool protest from her adorable lips.

He thrust his key in the lock—and the door opened suddenly and swiftly before him. Mercedes was standing before him, and he saw instantly that she was more than usually displeased.

"Well, Crœsus," she greeted him, "I've been waiting for you to return."

He realized instantly that she knew his secret and, despite his embarrassment, he wondered how she had discovered it: in what asinine manner he had failed to cover his trail. Still wrapped in his cloud of perplexity, he entered the sitting room, sat down with his hat on, and looked up blankly at her. Her wonderful dark eyes were bright with anger, and he realized she was with difficulty controlling an impulse to lash out at him furiously.

After a silence of several seconds, during which she supposed she had reduced him to pulp, Mercedes spoke:

"Julie, why didn't you tell me? You've kept this secret from me for more than a year. You knew how happy the news of your good fortune would have made me. You must have known—if you know anything, which I sometimes doubt—how much worry and depression, how much disgraceful scrimping and saving it would have spared me. Julie, what have you got to say in your defense?"

"Nothing, my dear," he replied with a vigor and suddenness he had never hitherto manifested. It should have warned her, but it didn't.

"I'm ashamed of you." Her voice rose on a strident note.

"Did I leave a letter lying around?" he asked with eager curiosity.

"You did—and I read it."

"I'd forget my fool head if it wasn't part of my physical equipment. Well, I have nothing to explain. It's my business, Mercedes. Hereafter you will sing soft and low where I am concerned. I'm a little bit weary of being bossed. No more of it, please. It has but recently occurred to me that you've been running me ragged, and I've had enough. Now, erase that look from your pretty face, and let's talk about something else."

Mercedes stared at him, frank incredulity now replacing the look of repressed fury in her amazingly lovely eyes. Suddenly her lip commenced to quiver, and she fumbled in her hand bag on the table for a handkerchief. Julie eyed her unconcernedly.

"No use trying the tyranny of tears on me, Mercedes," he suggested. "That plan isn't workable any more. You weep too readily, and tears will never again bring me fluttering to your feet, to proclaim myself an abominable brute and admit a fault I have not committed. I've got to the point where I decline to abuse myself to win your smile and forgiveness. Go take a jump in the lake."

This was too much. Mercedes uttered a low, dramatic cry and swooned. Julie was distressed and frightened, but not to such a degree that he failed to note that his wife had taken excellent care to pre-

cipitate herself on an adjacent sofa; he was not much concerned, therefore, when she slipped limply to the floor and lay there face downward.

"That carpet's dirty as the devil, Mercedes," he warned.

In about a minute Mercedes sighed gustily; then she commenced to kick up and down very violently, beating a devil's tattoo that raised a minature cloud of dust from the ancient carpet.

She had never done this before, and Julie wondered why she did it now. He decided at length that this was because she had never been forced to do it previously. Plainly she was in hysterics, and because this was a new note in his domestic drama, he sat quietly looking at her, listening to her wild sobbing, her perfervid moaning. She was pitiful. Julie admitted this to himself.

So at last when Mercedes realized she had failed, rose, went into the bathroom and locked herself in, Julie fled. He had no very coherent idea whither he was bound, but a cinema theater happened to loom suddenly in his path, he entered. It was deserted, except for the first ten rows of seats, so he sat down in the very last row, comforted by the darkness, and listened to the organ sob out an air that seemed strangely familiar. After a while he remembered the title. It was Love's Old Sweet Song.

He sighed and got out. He didn't like Love's Old Sweet Song—not just then. "I wonder if Gloria's name is in the telephone book?" he soliloquized. "I'll ring her up and ask her to have dinner with me. She'll

understand. She knows I'm not one of these doggy married men who aren't understood at home. She knows me! By jingo, I'll ring her up."

He went to the public telephone in the Palace Hotel, looked up Gloria's number and entered a booth, but could not get an answer to his call.

As he came out of the booth the girl attendant in charge said to him, "Don't forget your pineapple, mister!"

It was true. He had carried the pineapple which the mate of the South Sea trader had given him back to the hotel as a votive offering to Mercedes. Throughout the unpleasant scene there he had clung to it. He had even carried it into the cinema palace. . . .

"A man gave it to me. I don't want it. Would you like it?" he blurted.

"Oh, thank you. I'd adore it."

She looked after his retreating form. "That boy friend's cuckoo," she decided. "If he didn't want the pineapple, what'd he mean by carryin' it with him?"

She did not know that Julie was asking himself the same question and not finding any acceptable answer. However he did not pester himself long with the problem. It occurred to him presently that in a copy of the Electric Engineering World he had in his pocket there was an article on thunderbolts by Dr. Nirander, of the University of Upsala, Sweden. Nirander was the world's authority on lightning . . . Julie found a seat in the lobby of the hotel and read.

A passer-by heard him murmur, "Remarkable. I must visit Upsala. That Swede knows things I'm going to find mighty useful!"

CHAPTER III

It was nine o'clock before Julian Grannis decided the lobby of the Palace Hotel was not a good place in which to spend the night. It occurred to him about this time too that he was hungry, which realization naturally reminded him of the dinner engagement which Mercedes had made for him with her friends from Los Angeles.

He was vaguely distressed to think that he might have been guilty of a discourtesy; he remembered now that, in the state of mental chaos in which he had left Mercedes, it was probable she had been unable to think of a satisfactory last-minute excuse to escape her guests. . . . Perhaps it had been gross of him not to have kept his own temper and performed her thinking for her. . . . He hated to humiliate her. . . . He wondered if she was still a prisoner, self-committed, in the bathroom; wished he could forget quickly the picture of the undignified spectacle she had presented, lying on the floor and beating it with furious alternate thumps of her heels.

Of course, he had seen her weep often enough, but she had not hitherto been undignified to the point of hysteria. . . . Well, he'd suffer for her suffering, that was certain. Not that Mercedes would nag him, of course, for she was far from being a nagger, but she would be certain to indicate gently and politely how

deeply he had hurt her and how heroically she would have to struggle with her better nature to eradicate the memory of his transgression. No, he had no fear that he would be treated impolitely upon his return to the hotel; the devil of it was he would be greeted too politely!

From an adjacent dining room the strains of an orchestra reached him. Jazz! He loathed brasses in an orchestra. They made him nervous. Now, a quintet playing a Strauss waltz . . . he watched flappers and their callow escorts hurrying down the lobby to that most dreadful of modern institutions, the dinner dance. . . . What were those youths going to do with their lives, anyhow? Not a great deal, he feared. They didn't look like lads into whose soul the iron had ever entered. . . . They knew not the competition of existence. He wished he could be free to-night, of his profound thoughts, of his serious attitude toward life. He wanted to be lighthearted and care free, a little bit silly. . . .

Standing a little apart from him two elderly gentlemen were discussing a hydroelectric promotion: "There's a man named Grannis, formerly with the Western Sierra people. . . . We should get him at any price. He knows more about lightning arresters than any half dozen of the so-called experts. . . ."

"Try and get me," Julie murmured at their broad backs, and fled to obviate any such effort on the part of the interested pair. A little old shabby-genteel man sidled toward him and begged for a match, remarked on the beauty of the evening and seemed disinclined to be on his way.

Poor old chap! Lonely perhaps, lonely as all the world is, even in the very moments when it strives to prove it is happiest. Julie wished he wouldn't talk to him; the old fellow had the sickly sweetish breath of a diabetic . . . unpleasant . . . strange how all the queer people in the world seemed to pick on him; he had a feeling that the little old shabby-genteel man was screwing his courage up to the point of soliciting a "loan."

Well, he could have some money, of course, but why the devil didn't he ask for it and be on his way? . . . Terrible to be old and poor and diabetic and unable to avoid a preponderance of starch in one's diet. . . .

A fattish man with a cold face touched the little old shabby-genteel man on the shoulder; he said no word, but jerked his thumb authoritatively toward the exit. Julie understood. House detective, protecting the guests. The old man flushed, and Julie said:

"Mr. Twombly, here is that five dollars you were good enough to loan me yesterday. Thanks a thousand times."

The alleged Mr. Twombly's hands closed over the bill eagerly. "Oh, no hurry, Mr. Jackson," he protested, "no hurry. Still, since you insist——"

He proffered a hand which Julie shook heartily; then the other, mustering the fragments of a lost dignity, obeyed the house detective, who looked at Julie grimly.

"An' that little panhandler's name ain't Twombly either," the former declared. "He's an old, broken-down jockey, and his name's Benny Vries."

"Well, what of it?" Julie grinned mischievously.

"I ride a hobby horse of my own occasionally."

The house detective turned away. He couldn't understand such people. Julie moved toward a smart and very expensive coupé parked just off the main lobby between two pillars. A neat placard on the bonnet informed him that the car was the first prize offered by a local newspaper in a subscription campaign, which explained sufficiently why it was on exhibition in the hotel. To Julie, who had never known luxury in the matter of automobiles, his employers having furnished him with cheap but sturdy four-cylinders, this coupé suggested the apotheosis of automotive delight. So he commenced an interested inspection of it, which wavered when he became aware, subconsciously, that somebody was staring at his shoulder blades. He turned and looked into the face of Gloria Justin.

"Oh, hello, Gloria," he cried enthusiastically. "I wish I'd met you a couple of hours ago. I telephoned your home, but received no answer." He shook hands.

"I'm sorry, Julie. I dined to-night with some friends in their suite upstairs. I was about to go home early —rode with Ben to-day, and I'm tired." She noted a faint shadow of disappointment flit across his features, and added: "But not too tired to avoid a little visit with you, Julie. I suppose we can find a seat in the lounge."

"I haven't had any dinner, Gloria. Suppose you sit with me in that dining room yonder while I eat. You might have an ice or a small cup of coffee, or something." His objection to brasses in an orchestra had vanished instantly, and dancing between bites

appeared to be a most desirable form of exercise. "One little dance, perhaps," he pleaded. "It's been so long, Gloria. I'll not keep you up late, and I'll take you home in a taxi."

She smiled her acceptance, and they checked his hat and her cloak. At the entrance to the dining room the head waiter met them. "I'm very sorry, sir, but every table is occupied. If you will, perhaps, wait fifteen or twenty minutes——"

Julie's gaze wandered over the room, appraising the situation, hoping the head waiter might be in error. Suddenly Gloria saw his glance focused along the wall and following the direction of his gaze saw Mercedes Grannis seated with a man at a table for two. Even as they looked, Mercedes' calm, faintly superior gaze met theirs. Gloria nodded, but Mrs. Grannis ignored the nod; she had eyes only for her husband.

Julie flushed. "Apparently," he said, "we are in the wrong church, and there are no pews. Thank you, Captain, but I'm much too hungry to wait. Suppose, Gloria, we go over to Narcisco's restaurant. We were accustomed to patronize it in the old days. It will be quite deserted at this hour."

"I think that's a splendid idea," she urged, and they retreated as casually as they had entered. At the new Montgomery Street exit they took a taxi, rolled up and over Market Street and down deserted Montgomery Street through the heart of the financial district. On the edge of the Latin Quarter they alighted at Narcisco's, one of those unpretentious Italian restaurants for which San Francisco is famous.

"After all," said Julie (throughout the short ride he

had not spoken), "I think I prefer restaurants dedicated solely to food. The old place looks as grimy as ever."

They entered and were recognized instantly by Signor Narcisco, despite the years that had intervened since last they had patronized him. He shook their hands cordially.

"And old Joe, too," Julie declared with enthusiasm, and shook hands with a fat waiter. He gazed a moment around the walls, decorated with terrible mural paintings of scenes in and around the Bay of Naples, then followed the beaming Joseph to a little private box, with Narcisco bringing up the rear.

"A cocktail?" Narcisco knew the customers he could trust.

"I'll chance it, Narcisco. I'm back in San Francisco for good, so I know you wouldn't risk ruining an old customer and, henceforth, a steady one."

Narcisco gazed questioningly at Gloria. "I have already dined, Narcisco."

"Ah, a liqueur and a demi-tasse?" the boniface suggested. Gloria nodded.

"Bring me, please," Julie ordered, "a field salad with hearts of artichokes. French dressing and garnished with anchoives. Then I'll have an order of your incomparable sole Meunière, with some shoe-string potatoes. After that a crêpe suzette and a pot of black coffee."

"With brandy, no?" Narcisco was very hopeful. "It is but two-year-old California brandy, but very good. I make it myself at my ranch in Napa Valley."

"With brandy, Narcisco. And a pint of sauterne."

"I'VE EVEN PHOTOGRAPHED LIGHTNING AND DISCOVERED THE DIRECTIONS IN WHICH IT TRAVELS."

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"Ah-hah! I have it," their host declared with all the enthusiasm of one to whom there can be neither risk nor illegality in dispensing liquids forbidden by law. He hurried away on his joyous errand, followed by the perspiring Joe.

Then, for the first time, Julie and Gloria looked at each other.

"Did you see what I saw, Gloria?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Well," he rejoined philosophically, "perhaps the cocktail will give me strength to face my impending troubles. I often think, Gloria, that the Lord created me a perennial Tumble Tom."

"I do hope, Julie," Gloria answered, faintly cool, "that you do not feel guilty because your wife saw you with me."

"No, no, Gloria, not that. But you met the situation so splendidly. You nodded to her—and she gave you the dead face. That hurt."

"It didn't hurt me. I anticipated it. Nine women out of ten would have acted similarly."

"Thank God, you're the tenth. But it hurt me. I couldn't help wishing my wife had been a bit more sporting. She might have known I would not have been ungraceful toward her. I wonder who that big, fat, rosy fellow with her is?"

"You did not, then, anticipate meeting Mercedes when you asked me to sit with you?"

"Good Lord, no. I wouldn't embarrass a mouse."

"I can well believe that, Julie. I was a witness to your extraordinary and expensive efforts to save Mr. Twombly from embarrassment." She laughed heart-

ily. "Ah, Julie, you're such a queer creature. God only made one Julie and then the devil destroyed the mold."

Joe appeared with the cocktail and Julie raised the glass. "I drink to liberty," he toasted. "To confusion to all swanks, frauds, deceivers, pretenders and boneheads. And now," he added, "having exorcised that lot from our party, Gloria, I drink to your beauty and your beautiful soul."

He blushed at his own effrontery, and the little-boy look was in his eyes again. And for that she wanted to kiss him!

"If it wasn't so late to tuck away a heavy dinner, I do believe I'd have some stewed tripe, Spanish, with risotto," he decided.

"You would, of course, you vulgarian." Their eyes held each other; they laughed and, lo, Julie was no longer burdened with his vague distress, the girl no longer fatigued.

He gazed around the little booth with dawning wonder in his eyes. "In this very booth I kissed you good-by, Gloria, the night before I sailed for Peru. That was a long time ago."

"And considerable water has flowed under the bridges since, Julie."

"Life is terrible, Gloria. It does things to some of us—and some of us do things to it. It's a game in which the cards are stacked against us from the beginning."

"You aren't developing into a misanthrope, Julie?"

"No, but occasionally I grow weary. Too many things to think about; too much to do and only one

little lifetime in which to do it. So many futile, useless, heartbreaking interruptions to a game that will always be left undecided—called on account of darkness."

She felt a swift pang of pity for him. "I suppose the world *is* hard on the dreamers, the men and women with constructive ideas they are so anxious to develop into vigorous-brained children."

He ignored her observation, sensing only her sympathy, for he reached across the table and patted her hand. With great deliberation and enjoyment he drank his cocktail. "I was never much of a drinking man; a night out always means, to me, a day spoiled or lost. Bad for thinking. But I have enjoyed this drink; it soothes me."

A sudden humor now seized him. "Well," he ruminated, "this is certainly a huge joke on Mercedes. You know, Gloria, she isn't so different from others of her sex. She will have the last word. But to-night, when she gets home, she'll be tongue-tied. Keno! The two goats met on the foot log over the brawly stream, but, contrary to Mr. Æsop's version, we're not going to butt each other off. I have a notion that such discussion as will occur will be calm, orderly and free from prejudice, with a degree of mutual understanding remarkable for its clarity and charity."

"Well, whatever happens, you're not the goat, Julie."

"Neither is Mercedes. It's just a bully joke on both."

"I'm not so certain," Gloria remarked after a brief silence, "whether if I were married I would be altogether content with a husband who could not exhibit

jealousy. One loves to realize one matters that much."

"But that would be ridiculous on my part because Mercedes is a perfect wife and has never given me the slightest grounds for jealousy. It would be most unfair of me to be jealous of her because I trust her absolutely."

"I hope she trusts you as implicitly."

"I'm sure she does. I'm not very much of a devil."

"Of course not. You wouldn't know how to begin to be a devil."

"Still, devils are popular with women, Gloria." He yearned to give her his confidence. "I'll tell you something, Gloria." And he related the story of the legacy from his Uncle Jarlath.

"How wonderful, Julie! I'm so glad for both your sakes. How thrilled your wife must have been at the news!"

He confessed that he had not told her and why. "Of course, I can't blame Mercedes for thinking I'm a fool with money. If she knew what I planned to do with my legacy, she'd think me an even greater fool, and, viewing the situation from a practical, worldly, and slightly selfish view, she would be absolutely right. It means a great deal to a woman to know that she may have the worldly things women set their hearts upon."

"Of course"—dryly—"you are absolutely unworldly, Julie."

"I do not want very much for myself, Gloria, but really I do want for Mercedes all that it is possible for me to give her and all that it is reasonable she should have. I want comfort—some luxury, even—although

I'm not hell bent on wallowing in it, but if it seems we can't be happy unless we do wallow in it, the wallowing shall be done when we can afford it and not before. I have a few ideas wandering around in my fool head, and they obsess me.

"The two years I spent up at Madrone with the Western Sierras Power Company have been wonderfully fruitful in a scientific way. There are plenty of thunderstorms up there in the mountains, so I erected a laboratory and designed and built some instruments to make tests on lightning. I've even photographed lightning, discovered the why and the wherefore of it, where it comes from, the directions in which it travels, the speed at which it travels and the distance it travels.

"What causes lightning, Julie?"

"Friction of the particles of moisture, usually frozen moisture, contained in the thundercloud."

"Thanks, Julie. I never wanted to know until now —and now I know. Have you any scientific explanation as to why the wind blows?"

"Oh, yes. Why, laymen learned all about that in physical geography. A mere matter of air waves—hot and cold, you know, at different altitudes, creating a vacuum and producing suction."

"Hum-m! Julie, where does the light go when it goes out?"

"Gloria, you are spoofing a scientist and in such matters scientists have no sense of humor. However, to get back to Mercedes. I didn't tell her because I don't want any argument about how we shall spend Uncle Jarlath's fortune. I dislike argument; it interferes with cogent thought, and cogent thought is some-

thing I have great need of in my profession. And one doesn't get an argument unless one supplies an incentive—so I decided not to supply the incentive."

"But when your wife does, eventually, discover——"

"Oh, she's discovered it already, God knows how."

"How long ago?"

"To-day, some time. The exact hour is unimportant. She knows, and I know that she knows, because she told me, and we had a tiff. Natural under the circumstances, of course, but for the first time in our married life I lost my temper and wouldn't discuss the matter and was rude enough to tell her to take a jump in the lake. So she wept and had hysterics."

"Weren't you a little bit cruel, Julie? Such remarkable metamorphosis in a hitherto tractable and more or less woolgathering husband is little short of shocking."

"You're right, as usual. I thought all that out myself—a little later. We had an engagement to dine with some people she met in Los Angeles—a man and his wife—the Jacob Branders. I understand they are sufficiently rich to be venerated——"

"Except by the scientifically inclined. Go on, Julie, and forgive my interruption."

"Of course. One of the privileges of your sex, my dear, analogous to your habit of answering one question by asking another. Well, as I say, things got a bit thick—so thick it didn't seem possible for us to pull the dinner off, so I fled, leaving to poor old Mercedes the unpleasant task of phoning her friends and making some sort of explanation. I really couldn't do it myself, you know. After all, they aren't my friends. I have never met them."

"The situation was, apparently, not nearly so thick as you imagined it to be.

"If it happens again, Julie, do not be distressed and do not run away. Women are natural dramatists; man's chivalry, pity and tolerance (for, despite the cunning little ways of European men, their nadir of gallantry is to be found in the American husband) make a most excellent weapon in the hands of a wife. I suppose," she added, "that of all men scientists are the most intractable."

"If that be so," he assured her, "it's because we seek only the truth. Gloria, if my dream comes true, what a boon to humanity will have been my brief and unimportant presence on earth! The butterfly, emerging from its ugly cocoon, a thing of beauty, lives gloriously for a day and dies. It's much the same with human beings who aspire to live gloriously, only some of us like to live beyond the grave. The man who can play with thunderbolts successfully, who can harness them and tame them to do the world's work, or at least not interfere with it, will not be forgotten."

"So that's the little job you have cut out for yourself, is it?"

He smiled wistfully and a little sheepishly.

"Well, Julie." She raised her liqueur glass. "Here's to your dream. God grant it may come true. It would have to be a big dream, of course, and a worthy one to be worthy of you. Nevertheless," she added slangily, "I must say you're a pig for punishment, competing with What's-his-name—Icarus, who flew so high."

"And Icarus' wings were consumed, if I remember

my mythology. And, like him, I too may fall in the very end."

"But surely you do not contemplate including your wife in this supreme sacrifice."

"Socially, perhaps. Domestically, perhaps, although I hope not. But financially, no. I'm going to have Ben Whitton buy one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of bonds to protect Mercedes. That will leave me with no worries and a half million dollars, and I'm going to bet it all that I can juggle thunderbolts like the chef juggling a crêpe suzette. But my ambitions spoil her plans. She has no sympathy for them, regarding them as chimerical, fantastic, not grounded in substantial common sense."

"What I want to know, Julie, is why you confide all this in me?"

"I have to—or bust. You're also going to be my confidential secretary. Ben says he can spare part of your time for my work. You shall have a salary agreeable to you."

She gazed long and earnestly at the shabby tablecloth. "I'm not sure I want the position, Julie, although, of course, it is almost a necessity for me to earn more money. Ben is very kind, but his means are limited at present."

"I know what you're thinking of," he challenged, "but I veto your objection. You're hired. Write your own ticket, and to-morrow buy me some office equipment and arrange to sign checks for me at the bank."

"I wish you'd get somebody else, Julie. Really I do. You're a dear to ask me, and I am most appreciative, but——"

"Can't trust anybody else. Brainy women are too scarce."

"Very well, then," she agreed finally. "But after I enter your employ, do not ask me out to dinner. That's understood."

He rode home with her to the little cheap apartment where she lived with her mother. "Good night, Gloria," he said simply at parting. "The night wasn't a washout after all, thanks to you. And now, like Mr. Pepys, home and to bed."

"Do not go like the quarry slave, scourged to his dungeon," she flung after him good-naturedly, travesty-ing the epilogue from Thanatopsis, "but, soothed and comforted by an unfaltering faith, approach the hay like one who drapes the mantles of his couch about him and lies down with thunderbolts."

A little later she sat before her cheap dressing table, brushing her hair and thinking of him, of Mercedes, of the distant, dimly seen obstacles to their perfect bliss. "A cat," she reflected, "only Julie will never know it, or, knowing it, will be much too gallant to admit it."

She brushed furiously. "Looked guilty as a sheep-killing dog when Julie and I walked in. Refused to recognize me and refused to recognize Julie, although she couldn't take her eyes off him. She'll crush his spirit.

"Oh, Julie, Julie, you sweet dumb-bell, how casu-ally, how insouciantly, you have forced me for the second time to play second fiddle in your thunderbolt orchestra?"

Poor Julie! Poor Mercedes! Poor Gloria!

Meanwhile Julie had returned, like a laggard schoolboy, to his hotel. To quote a colloquialism, he felt that he had no home and had been condemned to the dog house. He yearned to remain out all night, but, since such an act would place him under the shadow of suspicion as to his morals and would connote a lack of courage to face an issue, he let himself into their apartment, firm in a resolve not to maintain his obstinate silence should Mercedes renew the attack. He wanted peace, and he was prepared to pay almost any price for it except the sacrifice of his cherished ambition.

"Honey captures more flies than vinegar," he decided, and whistled cheerfully as he switched on the light. "Hey, Mercy," he called with equal cheerfulness. She did not answer him, so he went into the bedroom and discovered she was not at home.

"How good God is!" he soliloquized, and undressed with great rapidity and crawled into his own bed. "Hope I'll be sound asleep when she comes in, but if I'm not and she doesn't shake me, I'll pretend I'm asleep."

He was forced to pretend, for Mercedes came in not five minutes later and switched on the light. Julie did not stir. She stood at the foot of his bed a half minute, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of the bedding. Then: "Julie?"

He continued his futile pretense.

"Julie!"

He stirred. "Yes, darling!"—sleepily.

"I'm sorry for what happened to-night."

"So am I. Forget it. Scraps will occur in the best-regulated families." He was resolved to be friendly, to ask her no questions that might tend to embarrass her; when she bent over and kissed him he reached up and twigged her ear, pretending meanwhile an overpowering desire to drift off into slumber again.

"Mrs. Brander had a sick headache," she continued. "I felt certain you'd remember our dinner engagement with them and return in time to go out with us. But when Mr. Brander called for us with his car at seven thirty you were still absent, so I left a note, asking you to join us at the hotel as soon as you returned. He was so sorry not to have the pleasure of meeting you."

"Sorry. Didn't return until a little while ago, so didn't see your note."

"I thought, when you came into the dining room at the Palace to-night, that you had. When I looked again, you had disappeared."

He sat up in bed, thoroughly awake. "Where's the note?" he demanded.

She glanced toward his dresser. "The maid must have removed it, Julie. I don't see it."

"Hum-m! I saw you, of course. And the chap with you was Brander, eh? I wonder why he selected a table for two if you were expecting me. I backed out because I thought I would be intruding."

"Oh, not at all. And I don't know why he didn't select a table for three or four. Perhaps he thought we could change if you came in."

"Oh!" He lay down again.

"Who was that pretty woman you had with you, Julie?"

"An old and dear friend of my youth, Mercy. She went to convent with you. Her name's Gloria Justin."

Mercedes pondered while undressing. "I can't seem to place her, exactly. I do wish you'd brought her over. It would have been so nice to renew acquaintance."

"She nodded to you, Mercy. Perhaps I'm wrong, but it seemed to me you ignored the nod, so we thought it best to go elsewhere."

She turned to him in sudden fury—the fury of a woman who knows she is cornered, who knows her husband knows he has her cornered and who may at any moment tell her so. In such emergencies it was Mercedes' policy to go to the attack immediately, to silence his impending accusation by bringing against him a blanket indictment. "You had no business gallivanting around the town with another woman," she charged. "Suppose some of my friends saw you? What would they think? How unkind of you, Julie, to run the risk of humiliating me? You refused to dine with me so you could dine with this Gloria Justin. Oh, don't protest. Of course you did. I know what I'm talking about. You don't love me any more; I've known it for a long time; I've suffered long enough in silence under your cruelty and neglect."

"My dear Mercy, how can you say such a thing?"

"We will not discuss it further. Please let's not talk about it. It's too disgusting, too terribly humiliating to forget quickly, although I shall try."

"Dear Mercy, look at me," he commanded, but resolutely she turned toward the mirror on her dressing table. So he sat up in bed again and looked over her shoulder into her face, reflected in the glass. "The back of your neck is interesting, Mercy, but your face is positively entrancing. Look at me."

She looked down at her toilet articles instead.

"R-a-t-z—rats," he mocked. "Don't be silly, Mercy. I'm a bit of a dumb-bell on most things but occasionally I have flashes of inspiration that amount to genius. I seek only the truth—facts. I have not found either in this discussion."

"Do you mean to tell me I have not been truthful with you, Julie?"

"You pulled an attack of fake hysterics on me this evening, and you ought to be ashamed of it; the incident of the alleged note is, to say the least, open to suspicion; you recognized Gloria Justin, and you gave her the dead face, even as you omitted her name from the list of my friends who I desired should receive invitations to our wedding. You were frightened when you saw me, and you were glad when I left without joining you, because had I done so your friend Mr. Jacob Brander would have been embarrassed.

"I had elected to ignore this unpleasant incident, which would have been an easy thing to do because I was neither suspicious of you nor jealous of you, Mercy. But you haven't played your hand very well, and now that you realize it, you have decided to try the old, unfailing game of tackling me before I tackle you. Well, I have never quarreled with you before, Mercy,

but to-night there's only going to be one debater in the house and that's me."

"We will not discuss it further," she reiterated loftily.

"Fine. The quarrel's ended, and I win. Hurrah for me! Hurrah for old, downtrodden Julian P. Grannis. However, I can't be quiet and go to sleep while I continue to suffer such violent pangs of curiosity. How did you discover I had a lot of money about which you knew nothing?"

"That distresses you, doesn't it?"

"It does, indeed, Mercy. I had thought I had taken more than ordinary precautions. I'm ashamed of myself."

"You should be."

"Come now, Mercy, out with it. You've got me licked on that point, so be generous. Who told you?"

"Your bank book dropped out of the pocket of the coat of your brown tweed suit when I picked it up off the chair, where you so carelessly threw it. I'm always picking up after you. You're so disorderly, Julie."

"You haven't picked up after me for more than a year, Mercy. So you peeked into your old man's little bank book, eh? You knew I had a savings account, of course?"

"No, I did not."

"Don't blame you. I've never been able to save anything on my salary. You saw to that."

"There you go again, throwing up to me the old charge of my extravagance. How can anybody save anything on five hundred a month?"

"Well, I managed to. My savings account shows a balance of a trifle over nineteen hundred dollars."

She nodded. "While I've been pinching and scraping. Oh, Julie, how could you deceive me so!"

"In order that we might have something to live on in a day of stress."

"I don't see how you accomplished it. Really, provoked as I am with you, Julie, I must admire your spirit of self-sacrifice."

"Not self-sacrifice. Extra work, my dear. Articles written for the trade journals; a few fees earned as a consulting engineer during my vacations; a few lectures delivered here and there; a little coaching to a pair of boys who came up to Madrone during their vacation to sit at the feet of your husband. You know that, while riding the Western Sierras power line, I always carried a carbine on my saddle. And you remember how you objected to my maintaining those two foxhounds, Nip and Tuck. Well, Nip and Tuck put many a mountain lion up a tree for me, and I secured a bounty on their scalps. Not infrequently we jumped coyotes and collected on their scalps. They paid their way, my dear.

"Then too, after you refused to live longer in Madrone and went to Los Angeles, I subleased our little furnished cottage for a hundred a month and lived at the construction camp for fifty. Once in a while I permitted myself to sit in on a dollar-limit poker game to while away the hours that grew burdensome while you were away. And there's one sure method of winning in a poker game—if you know poker: Don't bet 'em unless you have 'em. By the

way, Mercy, have you a little secret bank account?"

"Of course not!"

"I sent you four hundred dollars out of my five hundred dollars' wages every month, my dear. Are you without funds now?"

She nodded miserably and seemed about to weep. "Don't weep," he implored her. "Your tears distress me so. Have you a few bills that are worrying you, Mercy?"

Again she nodded—ashamed now.

"Well, tell your tight-fisted husband about them. How much?"

"Eight hundred odd dollars."

"Clothes, I suppose—mostly."

"Yes, dear."

"Well, hand the bills over to me in the morning, and I'll pay them. Don't want my wife worried about bills when she has worry enough already putting up with a curio like me."

"You're not a curio. You're a darling, and I do love you, Julie, if only you wouldn't provoke me so."

"There, there, Mercy." She had dashed suddenly to his bed and sat down beside him, groping for his hands. "Glad to do it for you, old pal. It's great to think I saved those few dollars. Of course, I never suspected you were being embarrassed or I would have come through like a sport long ago."

She kissed him tenderly. "I know I'm a great trial to you, Julie. I know I should have been more careful and considerate; I should have saved something out of the very generous allowance you sent me. But it's never too late to mend. I really should have some pin

money, so if you will give me one thousand dollars tomorrow I'll open a checking account and pay my own bills. I'd much prefer it that way, Julie."

"I will—on one condition."

"Name it."

"You must promise me faithfully not to plunge into debt so recklessly again. You must promise not to anticipate the future, to trust to luck. You must not spend a dollar until you have it to spend. Promise?"

Promising, she sealed the promise with a fervent kiss.

"You know my circumstances," he went on. "I'll excuse you this time, but if I catch you running me into debt again, your bank account will die of inanition, and thereafter I'll take over the handling of the family finances, or, rather, my secretary will."

"That would be humiliating," she bridled.

"I suppose so. It's humiliating for me to have to ask you for money."

"Who is to be your secretary?" she asked suddenly.

"Gloria Justin."

"What!"

"That same. She's employed in Ben Whitton's office now, and Ben and I are forming a copartnership. Hereafter, Mercy, there will not be the assurance of a monthly salary; remember that and act accordingly. I can't wear another man's collar all of my days. Got to be my own man, and nobody gets to be his own man unless he takes a chance."

She was silent, digesting this news, and he saw that it was disturbing her. "I suppose it will be all right," she admitted reluctantly, "but you know I never could bear Ben Whitton."

"Ben's all right, and you do not have to bear him, except once in a while when I bring him home to dinner." He added: "Nevertheless, it is a source of profound distress to me that my oldest and dearest friend is repellent to you. What did old Ben do to you, Mercy?"

"Nothing. He just doesn't interest me. I think he is obvious and ponderous. He hasn't a spark of personality."

She was too adroit to confess that a feeling of dismay swept over her whenever Ben Whitton looked at her; that she was afraid of him; that she knew instinctively he disliked and distrusted her, albeit he had never failed in the most meticulous courtesy where his friend's wife was concerned.

"You will change your mind when you know Ben better," he promised confidently. "Please, for my sake, try to be nice to him."

"Have I ever been anything else but nice to him? I'm sorry, though, that you took your future secretary out to dinner."

"I didn't take her out to dinner. She had dined already, and I met her quite by accident in the hotel lobby. She took pity on my lonely state and sat with me while I dined."

"Oh! Well, I have a very natural suspicion of secretaries who take pity on lonely married men." She laughed lightly as if to withdraw a sting. "I hope you will not take her out to dinner again, Julie. I know it would be silly of me, but I'm afraid I should be jealous."

"No fear. Gloria forbade it herself. Trust Gloria."

"She will be Miss Justin in the office, of course."

"She will not!"

There was a vehemence behind that terse declaration that warned his wife she had pursued that subject to its ultimate conclusion. How crusty and rebellious he was to-night! Well, she had come off far better in the skirmish than she had any right to expect; if she prodded him further in his present mood, she might lose the advantages already gained.

"You fire eater," she teased. "What has come over you? You're as fussy as a broody old hen."

He felt that he must explode if he talked to her another minute, for she had contrived, after the fashion of her kind, to retire gracefully from the field after putting upon him the onus of the quarrel. He said: "Well, good night. I agree with you that we ought not discuss the matter further."

A moment later, still wrapped in her synthetic aura of simplicity, innocence and self-conscious rectitude, she switched out the light and retired to her own bed.

Julie sighed gratefully as the darkness enveloped him. What was that childish question Gloria had propounded to him? Ah, yes. Where did the light go when it went out? Where did love go when it died?

He was too distressed to ponder this. "What a scare she gave me!" he reflected. "She doesn't know about Uncle Jarlath, after all. But, judging by the row my little savings account kicked up, how much horse power would develop in a row over six hundred and fifty thousand? Eight hundred dollars in debt. Wonder if she really owes that much."

CHAPTER IV

Julian Grannis had two pet refuges for doing clear, uninterrupted thinking—his bed and his bath. Following his drawn battle with his wife, he lay snuggled down in bed and thought of so many things, mostly connected with Mercedes and the job he was putting up on her, that it was close to dawn before he fell asleep and found surcease from the tiny devils of suspicion and apprehension that pricked him. Mercedes permitted him to sleep until eleven o'clock. She was fully dressed and had already breakfasted; it appeared she was going to church; she desired to know if he wanted to accompany her.

He replied: "Don't make me laugh, Mercy," and then laughed. Like practically all scientific men, he was a first-class pagan, tolerant toward the religious beliefs of others but fiercely intolerant of proselyting.

Mercedes, he knew, struggled to maintain an appearance of orthodoxy and he loved to tease her about it. So he said:

"In the beginning God created Adam and Eve. They were the first man and woman. They had two sons, Cain and Abel, and Cain bumped Abel off and fled into the land of Nod, where he took unto himself a wife. What I'd like to know is: who gave the bride away? Her old man? And if so who was her old man? Who made him and whom did he report to?

Likewise his wife? There's a hiatus somewhere. And why did Cain beat it into Nod? There wasn't a soul to pursue him except Adam, and Adam must have been fat and middle-aged at the time. Cain could just as well have remained at the scene of the *corpus delicti* and dodged his father. Why, the fool might have known that even if Adam caught him, Eve would make the old man lay off the rough stuff. She would have said: 'Adam, don't strike our boy. He's all we have left. Still, he must be made to realize he has been naughty. Spare the rod but make him play snap the whip with the serpent.' "

When he teased her thus, she knew he was in great good humor, for whenever she prepared to attend service he always selected some puzzling statement in Holy Writ. "There's another Biblical statement that hasn't been scientifically proved," he went on.

"When the kids spoofed the prophet Elisha the Lord caused two she-bears to dash out of an adjacent wood and gobble up forty-two of the brats. Now, could anybody blame children for making sport of Elisha? Consider his whiskers and the Mother Hubbard garments he wore. He must have been a most amusing sight. But what I want to know is this: The incident occurred in Palestine, didn't it? Well, there are no bears in Palestine; if there once were, they were little sun bears and physically incapable of devouring forty-two children. Why, it would require a grizzly at least half an hour to masticate one child, and I cannot believe that while each bear was busy masticating, the remaining forty children stood around and watched the operation. They wouldn't, you know. They were

Jews. Jews are too smart for that. Those other forty kids would have beaten it to the wood from which the two she-bears had emerged, and climbed trees out of danger and——"

She threw a pillow at him and went to the bathroom and drew his bath. Really, he was a dear! She wanted to be kind to him; all night she had been troubled by the thought that, while he would never admit it, she had hurt him.

Evidently she had not—at least not seriously—for he was once again his old, good-natured, slyly mocking self.

"For an unorthodox man, you're the most deeply religious man I ever knew," she charged when she came out. "You're kind, you're charitable, gentle, refined, noble, forgiving, understanding and understandable. Be sure to have your breakfast by the time I return. We must discuss our future plans."

He kicked the bedclothes off with fury. A moment later she heard him sink into the bath. Then silence descended. He was thinking of lightning arresters or something of that nature. Mercedes hung a Do Not Disturb card on the outside knob of the door and went off to church.

All was well with the world!

Five minutes after her departure, Ben Whitton, dressed for golf, walked into the bathroom.

"How did you get in?"

"Met Mercedes downstairs and asked her for the key. I have left the Do Not Disturb card on the knob. Shake a leg and get out of that bath. I'm going

to breakfast with you in your sitting room, and I'll order now. Two double portions of orange juice, deviled lamb kidneys and little pig sausages, cottage fried potatoes, coffee and pop-overs."

"With strawberry jam?"

"I grow old and forget," Whitton apologized. "Why do you continue to lie there and soak? Want me to wash your back?"

"I was going to do some thinking, Useless." Julie sighed and reached for the soap. "I love Sunday mornings, Ben. They make me feel so peaceful and holy. Well, order the breakfast, Butch. I'll be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

He was massaging himself with a towel when the room telephone bell rang, and he hastened to answer it.

"Julie, darling. Mercy speaking. I sent Ben Whitton up to see you."

"Good girl. He's going to breakfast with me."

"I'm so glad. Of course, he'll never go, so I'll not return until late in the afternoon. I should be an odd number, and I want you two to have a nice long visit together."

"Lean over and I'll pin a rose on you, Mercy. Thanks."

He shaved, donned pajamas, dressing gown and slippers and joined Ben in the living room. His face beamed with pleasure; he shook hands with his friend with the utmost solemnity.

The latter stared at him much as a mastiff stares through a fence at a poodle. Presently he said:

"Then the report is, like the report of Mark Twain's

death, grossly exaggerated. You are much too much at peace with the world this morning for one caught last night in a grave piece of deception."

"Gloria telephoned you, of course. I told her about it."

Whitton nodded gravely.

"God's still in His heaven and all's well with the world, Butch. What Mercy discovered was only a little secret bank account—about nineteen hundred dollars."

"How much did you settle for?"

"One thousand iron men, and cheap at double the money." A worn and scratched piano stood in the corner. Julie leaped to it now, struck a chord and began to sing the Holy City in a tremendous basso.

Ben Whitton shoved him rudely off the piano stool. "I can't abide a man who plays the black keys with his right."

They sang verses laudatory of Mademoiselle from Armentières. Then Ben played Mendelssohn's Spring Song, and Julie unloosed his disreputable old dressing gown and executed a Greek dance, leaping at the chandelier and finally turning a somersault that left him sitting bolt upright on the sofa. They stared at each other and grinned.

"Julie," said Ben Whitton, "you're a volatile spirit, and you've been corked too long. I hurried up here, expecting to find you as blue as a gun barrel."

"Isn't it awful for a man to be so two-faced, Ben? Why, I'm a whited sepulcher." He rose and declaimed:

When Freedom, from her mountain height,
Unfurled her standard to the air,
She tore the azure robe of night,
And set her stars of glory there.
Then, from his mansion in the sun,
She called her eagle bearer down,
And gave into his mighty hand
The symbol of her chosen land.

And he tossed a handful of dollar bills into the air. "No more Los Angeles bank rolls for me?" he cried.

Ben Whitton pulled out a silver flask. "Old private stock," he confided. "Bred in Kentucky."

"Eggnog?" Julie suggested eagerly, and sprang to the telephone to order the materials. "Eggnog," he repeated, "and we'll hoist one to Uncle Jarlath. His executor sent me an enlarged crayon reproduction of that eminent financier. Uncle Jarl was a serious man with a spade beard and a long, sad face like a gnu, perennially broken-hearted because, while people deposited money in his bank, they were often inconsiderate enough to take it out. He died without having discovered the great, underlying philosophy of finance; to wit, that money is round and made to roll."

The waiter came in with breakfast. They mixed the eggnog and then ate. And as they ate they talked —of old days, old friends, old half-forgotten incidents. Suddenly Julie demanded:

"Ben, ever hear of a man well known in the world of finance and answering to the name of Jacob Brander?"

"What does he look like?"

"Stout, red-faced, slightly bald, about forty and above medium height."

"The description fits the sole scion and heir of the Brander Timber Company. He lives in Pasadena with the other millionaires. Amateur golf champion, racing stable, hundred-and-thirty-five-foot schooner yacht——"

"That's the man."

"His father started life in Michigan as a lumberjack and got to be woods boss because he could thrash all the other lumberjacks. The old man saved his money and, after forty years of incredible toil, penuriousness, cruelty and crookedness, died some ten years ago, leaving Jake and ten millions."

"What sort of man is this Jacob Brander?"

"I only know by hearsay. Met him once. He was interested in an irrigation problem I was employed on. In fact, I imagine he was the principal proponent of it, because he seemed to have most to say. He hired me to make a preliminary survey, and when I reported back that the proposition was risky he thought I was too conservative. There wasn't enough water, Julie. Scarcely sufficient in years of normal rain and snowfall, but of course, as you know, one has to figure on the abnormal years. So I advised against it, but he went through because he had a lot of land to sell and he thought he could dispose of it at a huge profit with the water we had. Then along came four dry years in a row—and he took an awful walloping. Seems he'd given warranty deeds to the purchasers of his farms, and they sued him when the water failed and got judgment and their money back.

"That deal put a crimp in Brander's bank roll, but he had plenty left. He thinks he's a business man, but he isn't. I understand that from the time he was old enough to smoke cigarettes he gave his old man a run for the latter's money, but old Jacob stood for it because he was hell-bent on raising a gentleman, and probably he realized that all young gentlemen are apt to be a bit wild. He died, I daresay, believing he had done a top-hole job. His son was fired out of three Eastern universities before his father got interested in Pacific Coast timber and came to live in California.

"Before he was thirty, Jake had married two gold diggers who nicked him for a huge settlement. I understand, however, that his present wife has a fortune of her own. I daresay she'll need it before Jake's fifty."

"They're friends of Mercy's," said Julie thoughtfully.

Instantly Ben changed the topic of conversation. "Of course, it's really none of my business, Julie, what you do with your Uncle Jarlath's fortune, but I'm going to take the license of an old friend and ask. Are you going to shoot the whole works on your experiments?"

"No, Ben. I'm going to set aside a trust fund of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for Mercy, to be invested in good, sound securities. I draw the income. The remaining five hundred thousand I'll use. Know anything about trust agreements, Ben?"

"My attorney does. He can draw one up, and you can name some good solid bank as trustee."

"Not as sole trustee, Ben. I want you to act as trustee with them. They might saw off some of their cats and dogs on Mercedes. I need a watchdog."

"My name is Ben F. Whitton—F. meaning Fido.

"Your idea is to protect Mercedes. Well, the trust will be in your name, with a proviso that in the event of your death it is to remain intact and the income thereafter is to be paid to her."

"Fine. Will you have the matter attended to for me, Ben?"

"Delighted."

"The income will maintain us nicely," Julie went on. "It will mean an annual income larger than I have ever enjoyed. And Mercy will think it's my portion of the profits derived from our mythical partnership. Ben, I'm smart like a fox."

"Hum-m-m! You can't smell trouble like a fox, however." Whitton gazed at his friend with that searching, impersonal gaze that one associates with a rifleman estimating a range. "I wonder how you would meet trouble. Like a (he almost said lion) gentleman, I daresay."

"Are you referring to trouble or to defeat, Ben?"

"Defeat," Whitton corrected quickly. "In all that I have seen you attempt, you were inspired by a belief in victory analogous to that of a martyr. Defeat," he added with a heavy obviousness that sometimes caused more brilliant men to deem him dull, "is not easy to assimilate."

"I feel certain I'm on the trail of something, Ben. If I win, I shall be very happy in the joy of accomplishment; if I lose, I shall have had the pleasure of

having attempted to enthrone an impossibility as a fact."

"You are an incorrigible optimist, Julie."

"I wonder," said Julie, "if women ever have such friendships as men."

"Certainly not." Whitton's reply was almost a retort. "They have ideals, but they are not idealists; they give forth sweet lip music and think it sacrifice; they prate of love and forget to practice it; they are in love with love so their love is lopsided, which means that it is selfish. Their friendships are filled with mental reservations; they count their friends' faults where men forget them or refuse to believe that the faults outnumber the virtues." He thought a moment. "I have met but one woman to whom I would intrust my life."

"You mean your liberty, your freedom of action, Ben."

"Damn it, no. My privacy, my freedom of thought. Without that life is gone."

"You think you will never marry, Butch?"

"I know it."

"You don't know anything of the sort, you great boob. Upon what logical hypothesis do you hang such a very definite statement?"

"In all my life I have met but one woman whose character, whose mental and physical health indicated very strongly to me that my life would be happier if I married her. She is a woman who would have studied my moods and not intruded upon them; she could never be so gross as to invade the mental privacy of anybody; she would be kind, affectionate, brave

and capable of quiet sacrifice, unembittered. She would be sport enough to hold up her head and be human when her heart was heavy as lead. And I think, had I married her, she would have been quite willing to bear me not less than six children."

"You old-fashioned devil! Then, why didn't you ask her?"

"Because I wanted a wife, not a very dear friend, and because she did not want me for a husband. I had sense enough to see that."

"In love with somebody else?"

Ben Whitton nodded.

"I wouldn't have quit him. Almost any decent man can capture the woman he sets out seriously to stalk. The mere idea of being pursued intrigues women—starts them thinking seriously about you. And women are very introspective."

"You know less about women than a pig does about the nebular hypothesis."

"Did this dream girl of yours marry your hated rival?"

"She did not—and he wasn't a hated rival. If she had married him, it would have been the ideal eugenic marriage, and she would have given him children to enrich the world."

"Why didn't she marry him?"

"Because the idiot married somebody else. Life is like that."

"Is he happy?"

"If he isn't, he doesn't know it—so I suppose one might say he is happy."

"You might have performed a dual service—helped

her forget the other fellow and won a treasure for yourself."

"There is a time for filing such applications, old son."

"I would have liked to try my hand at fathering, Butch?"

"Well, why don't you?"

"Hostages to fortune, Butch. And, besides, there's Mercy's career to be considered?"

"Babies and violins do not mix, I suppose."

"Looks that way."

"I have never heard your wife play. Has she genuine talent?"

"I'll be hanged if I know. I like her playing, although it does seem to me that she lacks something. Perhaps it's dash. She was a wow as a Y entertainer in France."

"Has she done anything since?"

"She's studied mighty hard."

"Is there any hope of Mercy abandoning her career?"

"Well, I might smash her fiddle and refuse to buy her another."

Ben Whitton yawned and stretched. "How about eighteen holes of golf?"

They went—in Ben Whitton's car. It was a beautiful convertible coupé, brand new and decidedly expensive. Julie, who had never owned or driven such an automobile, was loud in his praise of it and mourned greatly because he could not afford the luxury of one like it. "It's horrible to be rich and pretend you're not," he complained. "But, then, science demands sacrifice of its devotees."

"You may drive this car whenever you feel inclined," his friend assured him generously. "After all, there are advantages in bachelorhood. I do not have to answer questions, thank the Lord!"

They rolled out through Golden Gate Park, proceeding leisurely along the main driveway, intending, when the beach should be reached, to turn down the Great Highway to Lakeside Country Club. They approached a curve not far from the beach.

"Death Curve," said Ben. "Drunks coming home from the beach resorts meet here in deadly embrace—By golly, here comes one now!"

He swerved far to the right as a long touring car came around the curve at fifty miles an hour. It was a sharp curve; to negotiate it successfully at that speed was an impossibility without overturning the car, and the driver appeared to realize this, for he jerked the wheel suddenly and in an effort to save the situation took the curve wide. At the same instant he appeared to realize also that a collision with Whitton's car was inevitable; he jammed down the foot brake hard; the brake lining squealed; there was a harsh scraping sound of the locked wheels skidding on the pavement and then the long nose of the touring car crashed into Whitton's left front wheel, careened off, tore away the latter's running board and jammed the fender down against the left rear wheel. There was a tinkle of broken headlights and windshield; the crash of the impact could have been heard for blocks.

Whitton, thrown violently forward against the steering wheel, had the breath driven out of him; for a moment he was weak and limp and fell over on his

friend, who, on his part, was badly cut about the forehead by broken glass. The blood, running down into his eyes, blinded him.

For the space of thirty seconds nobody said anything. Then a masculine voice reached Julie: "Damn it, man, why can't you stay on your own side of the road?"

"I'll answer that question in a minute," Julie called back. "I think you've hurt my friend. Come and look at him. I can't see. . . . Got blood in my eyes."

The driver of the other car got out and leaned into Whitton's car. He shook the latter gently.

"Knock-out," Whitton murmured. "Wow! Solar plexus. Bent ribs. All right in a minute." He lay there gasping. Then: "Traffic officer—here—in a minute—Julie. Thrash this murderer—for me—old son, before—officer—comes. Can't do it—myself."

As quietly, as obediently as if his father had ordered it, Julie slipped out of his side of the wrecked car. He came around the end of it, mopping the blood from his eyes. Dimly he saw the form of a large man looming before him; he winked and saw him better; he winked again and leaped at the man.

"Teach you manners," he growled. "Teach you—stay—your side of the road—ruin my friend's fine car——"

"I don't want any trouble," the offender cried, and backed away.

"No trouble—I assure you," Julie retorted, and led with his right. The man ducked adroitly—and Julie uppercut him with his left and straightened him up. A straight left staggered the fellow, a vicious right

cross caused him to rock on his feet and raise his arms to protect his face. Thereupon Julie, still blinking, beat a devil's tattoo on the latter's unprotected abdomen, and when the protecting arms fell, Julie got four good ones home on the nose and jaw, and the victim sprawled in the roadway.

Julie got a clean handkerchief and daubed his gory eyes some more. "Shall I kick his slats in, Ben?" he demanded dutifully.

"Three—for luck," Ben Whitton commanded, and Julie dutifully administered three good ones before going to the side of his friend's car. "Hurt much, Butch?" he queried. Ben Whitton raised his right hand in a flapping gesture. It might have meant anything, but to Julie it meant, "Go away!"

"What do you mean—go away?" he demanded.

"I mean I'm all right, you nut—at least I will be in another minute. Put your handkerchief over your eyes and stand still. The blood from the cuts on your forehead will congeal in a couple of minutes if you don't mop them. There, that's it. Hurt your hands, didn't you? Noble work, old son, noble work. You can still box a bit. Thanks. I'd do as much for you."

All the time his hand was flapping in that insane gesture, but it was to a woman in the other car he was signaling. Suddenly she appeared to understand his meaning, for she slipped quietly out of the car and disappeared into the shrubbery beside the road.

A traffic officer appeared, made a perfunctory investigation, took the names of the three men and the numbers of their cars.

The offender mumbled, "Entirely my fault. I'll pay for the damage—new car if the damage is too great to repair. I'll guard both wrecks. Officer, be a good fellow and telephone for the wrecking crew—two of 'em." He held out a card, which the policeman took and handed to Ben Whitton.

In the Park Emergency Hospital, Ben looked at his friend.

"Come on, Wildcat," he ordered. "We left that flask and contents down in your rooms. I want to rub my ribs with some of it. Did you enjoy the battle?"

"Immensely. I'd have done better work if I could have seen more clearly. I fear I bungled the job a bit."

"May that man never meet an expert," Whitton replied piously.

Such a nice car, too. Made me furious to see it splintered. That big dub! He wouldn't even defend himself."

"Oh, yes, he did, my son. He got a couple of good ones home on you."

"Never felt them"—wonderingly.

"You'll feel them to-morrow."

"Well," said Julie with a philosophic grin, "to-morrow is always another day. It certainly did rile me to hear that big bozo demand why we didn't stay on our own side of the road—after he'd crossed it to hit us. Still, I wish I hadn't kicked him when he was down."

"I had my reasons, Julie. So I acted quickly."

"So? Wasn't there a woman with him?"

"There was. His wife. To the devil with him."

Julie threw back his shoulders defiantly. "Oh, well, then, to the devil with him," he agreed.

They called a taxi and went back to the hotel, where they applied Ben Whitton's liniment externally and internally and spent a very pleasant half hour until Mercedes came.

She halted just inside the threshold and looked from one to the other, amazedly. "Julie, DAR-R-ling," she cried, "what *has* happened to you?"

"I called Butch a nonagenarian and questioned his professional ability, and he walked on my forehead."

"Julie!" Reproachfully she darted toward him, but he held up both hands to fend her off—hands badly swollen and stained with iodine where the skin had been knocked off. "Do please tell me what happened, Julie, darling?"

He scratched his head and looked silly. "It's—a little vague—I can't seem to remember, Mercy. Things seem sort of mussed up. Sometimes I think I'm right on the verge of remembering everything, and then it all fades and becomes blurred and uncertain."

"But, Julie, sweetheart, you *must* tell me."

"I imagine, Mrs. Grannis," Ben Whitton cut in dryly, "that the big idea is that he doesn't want to tell you."

And he gave her what, in the parlance of this modern day, might best be described as a dirty look.

"Oh, very well; I'll not insist. But it seems so mysterious, Julie. And you've been fighting on the Sabbath."

"And how!"

"And who!" Ben Whitton murmured without interest.

"Darling!" Julie said pleadingly.

"Now what do you want?"

"Suppose you get out your old fiddle and play Ben and me something soft and soothing, something that will drive dull care away."

"Really, Julie, I wish you wouldn't ask me—at least not for a little while. The sight of your battered face gave me such a shock I'm nervous."

"So you are," Whitton observed. "Really, you're trembling a little. Julie, old pup, run downstairs to the drug store and tell the druggist to give you some sort of sedative—some of those flat lozenge affairs one dissolves in a glass of water. Splendid thing for nerves."

Mercedes Grannis and her husband's friend faced each other. The man smiled at her grimly.

"Well?" he said—and the grimness was accentuated in his voice—"I hope you liked the sermon, Mrs. Grannis."

Her face was very white; her glance, unable to meet his, sought the carpet. "You'll not tell Julie?" she whispered.

"Of course not. You know that. Didn't I signal to you to run away after the accident? Didn't I make Julie cover his eyes with his handkerchief, on pretense of keeping the blood from flowing into them and clotting, while the blood from his cuts congealed? And didn't I order him out to thrash that animal you're gallivanting around with?"

"You need not have done that, Ben. There was nothing disgraceful about my being with him."

"Nevertheless, you'd have fainted had Julie discovered it. And he would have discovered it if I hadn't made him get busy—instantly. I realized that he must not recognize you; I knew he'd do anything I asked him to do, so I kept him busy while you made your get-away. I told him the woman with Brander was Brander's wife—and I gave Brander a fictitious name! As a usual thing, I do not lie for anybody. Julie's the exception. Don't think I did it for you. Now, you listen to me, Mercy Grannis. As a wife I think you're a washout. And you can't play the violin. Get on to yourself before it's too late. You're married to the finest man you'll ever meet, and you do not appreciate him. Chuck that fiddle of yours and breed Julie a couple of sons and forget the pig, Jake Brander. I know him, and he isn't worth a charge of buckshot. Now, you play the game with Julie hereafter, or I'll tell Mrs. Brander on you."

"You brute," she groaned furiously.

"Yes, I know you dislike me. You always did. You knew I could see through your insincerity the moment we met. You'd herd Julie away from me if you could. You can't. Don't ever try it again, either. The next time he wants me up for dinner, you see to it that I come. And the next time I invite you two to dinner, you find an excuse to remain away if you feel that way about it but insist that Julie come without you. From now on you speak a few kind words for old Ben Whitton, if you please. They'll cost you nothing. I love that husband of yours—the poor, nit-witted,

confiding, affectionate, woolgathering, lovable jackdaw. That man and I have been through hell together, and no wife, with her vague, indefinite feminine animosities and petty, unfathomable plans, is going to rob me of one of the most precious possessions in my dull life. You hear me?"

"I hear you. I understand."

"Thank you. In five minutes after Julie returns you're going to have a sick headache. Don't worry about him. A husband is the last man on earth to discover such things. But—break with the Brander person. It's an order. Understood?"

She bowed her head and walked past him into the bedroom, and Ben Whitton sat down and bit off a cigar and smiled a swordfish smile. "Sedative! Bah! What she needs is a cat-of-nine tails," he growled.

CHAPTER V

When Julian Grannis returned to his apartment with the sedative Ben Whitton had sent him after, in order to be free for a few minutes to say certain things to Mercedes for the ultimate good of the lady's immortal soul, Mr. Whitton was seated at the piano softly playing a selection from The Chocolate Soldier. His features were as bland and emotionless as those of a feeble-minded person. From the bedroom Julie heard repressed sobbing, so dutifully he went in and comforted his wife, without in the least suspecting the reason for her discomfort. When he endeavored to make her take the sedative she thrust it and him away from her and begged that she might be left alone to recover at her leisure from the shock incident to the so sudden discovery of his damaged face and hands.

"Oh, shucks, my dear," Julie protested. "All men have a fight every so often until they grow old and cautious. There are occasions in the life of a regular man when nothing but physical combat will keep his liver from turning flip-flops. If I hadn't worked off my indignation by thrashing the moron who ruined old Ben's nice new car, I would have been deathly ill this minute. You know, Mercy, I lose my temper about once every five years, but when I do hell pops."

"Don't be vulgar—please," Mercy pleaded.

Julie sat down suddenly on the bed. "Snap out of

it," he commanded. "I'll not be high-hatted. Don't tease the monkey."

She daubed her eyes, sat up and looked at him in amazement. He was returning her look coolly, searchingly, appraisingly and a little bit angrily; she had the feeling that his gaze was boring through her, searching out each little deceit, each little selfishness, each faithlessness she was striving so hard to conceal.

"Don't—scold—me, Julie, darling," she begged tremulously.

"You've been a little child long enough, and from now on the orders on your post are to pull yourself together and be a grown woman. I want no more of your fake megrims and vapors. Understand? You have lost the power to whip me around with tears, hysterics and silly pleas. You are putting forth the fiction of physical instability, when, as a matter of fact, you are strong enough to do a day's washing. Drink this. I bought it, and now you have to drink it, else the money's been wasted."

She drank it dutifully, wondering what was coming over this mild and patient man. Plainly he was not exactly in revolt, albeit he was ripe for it. Twice within twenty-four hours he had asserted his rights as a husband and provider. On the other hand, she was not ready to have him revolt, so plainly—since something must be done about it and done quickly she grabbed suddenly at him with both beautiful arms and caught him around the neck. "Oh, Julie," she breathed and held him tight, her cheek against his.

"This is as good a time to tell you as any," he said abruptly. "I've been investigating your friend, Mr.

Jake Brander, and have come to the conclusion that we will do without his friendship, Mercy. I do not know Mrs. Brander, so, perhaps, my decision will mean an injustice to her, but that cannot be helped. So many fine men I know are married to cats and so many fine women I know are married to dogs that one has to be careful. You will drop the Branders, Mercy."

"They will be returning to Pasadena in a few days, Julie. Must I be crass about this?"

"You can exercise your woman's wit and avoid being crass while still deferring to my wishes in this matter."

"But I can't tell them that my husband objects to my being friendly with them."

"Very well, then. I'll tell them myself."

"Julie! You wouldn't!"

"I'm dealing my own game, and you're not even the lookout on it. Play your own hand or sit back and let me play mine. That's final."

"You are very distressing to-day, Julie. Really, would you mind going somewhere with Ben? If you can dine out with him, please do so. I know I shall not be equal to the task of eating a bite of dinner, and I'll be poor company for you. I don't want to spoil the day for you."

"Thank you, Mercy. That's sweet and unselfish of you. Sure you want to be left alone?"

"Very."

He rose with alacrity, not to say a certain jubilation, kissed her good-by and rejoined Ben in the drawing-room, with his customary carelessness leaving the bedroom door ajar. "I have the remainder of the

day and the night off, Ben," he announced. "What do you suggest?"

"I suggest," Ben replied, "that we go to my apartment. My Chinese boy will shake us up some drinks and a dinner, and we'll talk."

"Good news. We haven't really had time for an old-fashioned game as yet. Somehow, Ben, as I grow older, it seems to me that the praiseful practice of intelligent conversation is waning. For my part——"

The telephone rang, and he answered it. "Ah, yes, Mrs. Brander." A pause. "I fear Mrs. Grannis will be unable to come to the telephone——"

Ben Whitton made a standing leap across the room and forcibly removed the receiver from Julie's hand. His other hand he placed over the mouthpiece. "Let me handle this," he commanded, and shoved his friend away. "Mrs. Brander?" he almost cooed. "That was a friend of mine who answered the telephone. You wish to speak with Mrs. Grannis? I'm sorry, but Mercedes is abed. She is not at all well and has retired in an effort to have a little nap. Will it be quite all right if I have her call you up, say, in two hours from now? . . . Oh, you wish to see me? . . . That is delightful of you . . . Certainly, Mrs. Brander. Unfortunately there is company here, so if you will excuse the lack of hospitality, suppose I go down into the lobby to meet you? . . . O.K.? Thank you so much. I'll be down directly."

He hung up the telephone and glanced toward the bedroom door. Mercedes was standing just inside it, where she could see Whitton; from her position, however, her husband could not see her. Her face

was chalky white, and she trembled as she placed the tip of her fingers on her lips and tried to smile at him gratefully. Casually, he crossed to the door and pulled it shut.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" Julie demanded suspiciously.

"Mrs. Jake Brander is in the lobby. She wanted to call upon your wife, and when I blocked that she expressed the hope that she might meet me. I didn't exactly lie to her, Julie, but I inculcated in her the belief that I am Mr. Julian Grannis because it seemed best for me to take the job off your hands."

"You thought that the instant I mentioned her name. Seems to me, old boy, you take jobs off your friend's hands on brief notice. There's a nigger in the woodpile here?"

"Not at all. You'd have been soft enough to have her come up, and we've had enough excitement here for one day. Didn't I hear you telling Mercy a moment ago to cut the Branders off her visiting list? I did. You raised your voice rather commandingly to Mercy, and I couldn't help overhearing your edict. And Mercy's excited and depressed. Think I'm going to have Mrs. Brander meet you in your present ferocious state of mind and permit you still further to embarrass Mercy by receiving Mrs. Brander as if she were a burglar? When you're angry you're tactless, old son. Permit me to take the brunt of this. I'll shoo her away and make her like it."

"Why does she want to see me?"

"Why, isn't it natural that she should desire to meet the husband of her friend? Her voice indicates to me

that she's a neighborly, friendly, democratic sort of woman."

"It didn't indicate that to me. Sounded mighty businesslike. Anyhow, I'll go down and see her. I kill my own snakes, you know. Deception now might mean future embarrassment, and I was never one to dodge an issue."

"What issue is there to dodge?"

That shut Julie up. In desiring to avoid friendliness with the Branders, he had acted on instinct rather than on any tangible issue, and he could not now admit that to Ben. "Well," he protested, "I judged, from what you told me about Brander, that I wouldn't like him, that he's the sort of man with whom I could not have anything in common. I'm getting too old to be bored, to be forced to submit to people that irritate me. Why should I not select my own friends?"

"No reason at all," the imperturbable Ben replied. "But the same rule applies to Mercedes. May I remind you that the husband who presumes to select the people his wife must like or dislike is taking on quite a large order, particularly if his wife has any spirit."

"I suppose so, Ben. But, somehow, I know I'm right in this instance."

"You're usually right, but unfortunately this time you can't prove it. I'm going to be so cold and disagreeable to Mrs. Brander that she'll dislike me on sight and never again desire to meet me. Boob, I'm helping you out of a disagreeable hole." And before Julie could utter another protest, Ben had disappeared into the hall. Instinctively realizing that within a few seconds his friend would follow him around the hall

and capture him at the elevator, Whitton ran downstairs; he knew that if he could reach Mrs. Brander first Julie would not dare to join them and disclose the conspiracy! An annoying creature, Ben Whitton. Too adroit, too quick a thinker.

Emerging from the elevator into the lobby, he cast a casual, inquiring glance about him. Julie had not beaten him in the race via the elevator. From across the lounge a good-looking woman of about thirty-five, large, well-dressed, gazed at him with cold, expectant eyes, and inasmuch as she was the only woman in the lobby Whitton crossed to her at once.

"You are Mrs. Brander?" he queried politely.

"I am!" Mrs. Brander's mouth shut on the words like a cellar door. "Will you please sit down?"

Whitton found a seat on the divan beside her and waited politely.

"Are you aware," she began without the slightest preliminary verbal skirmishing, "that Mrs. Grannis has been gallivanting around with my husband?"

"I was aware, madam"—Ben thought it best to be very dignified and aloof—"that Mrs. Grannis was on friendly terms with you and Mr. Brander. What do you mean when you say 'gallivanting'? Please remember, dear lady, that that word has an unpleasant sound when used in connection with Mrs. Grannis."

"Well, she dined with him Saturday night."

"I am aware of that. And I believe it was a source of disappointment to Mrs. Grannis that you were not present."

"Oh, was it? Well, if you must know, I wasn't

asked. Mr. Brander pleaded a business engagement, and I had my dinner in my room."

"Can Mrs. Grannis be blamed for that?"

"Perhaps not."

Whitton smiled disarmingly. "May I be pardoned for reminding you that Mrs. Grannis' husband was also expected at that dinner?"

"Well, then, why didn't Mrs. Grannis' husband attend?"

"He forgot all about it."

"I suppose that means we'll throw that indictment out of court. But Mrs. Grannis has seen a great deal of my husband's society in Los Angeles—so much so, in fact, that a certain amount of gossip has developed in the circles in which we move."

"That is most unfortunate, but, as you know, women will gossip on very slight excuse, and since Mrs. Grannis will, for the future, reside in San Francisco, don't you think you might glean a surcease from apprehension because of that fact?"

"You're very loyal, for an absentee husband, Mr. Grannis. I like you for it. The fault is, I daresay, more Jake Brander's than your wife's. I know men, and I know Jake Brander; at least I'm getting to know him, and I'll know him very well indeed after my detectives have trailed him a little longer. Mrs. Grannis left this hotel at 11:15 this morning—alone. Have you any idea where she went?"

"I have," Ben answered promptly. "She went for a ride out to the beach with Mr. Brander."

This reply staggered the lady. "You knew that?" she persisted.

"I have stated a fact."

"Well, don't you think it very strange that a married woman should leave her husband to go joy riding with a married man?"

"Well, now, Mrs. Brander, that all depends upon the point of view. Mrs. Grannis, like Cæsar's wife, is above suspicion. I have always felt that she was more than nine years of age and could be trusted to comport herself in such a manner as to reflect credit, rather than opprobrium, upon her husband. Mrs. Grannis, if I may be pardoned for saying so, is an unusually attractive woman; her husband is not the only man who pays instant and unstinted admiration. Indeed, her husband would not relish the thought that his wife is a frump who cannot command the admiration and little social niceties of their friends.

"And you must remember also, Mrs. Brander, that Mrs. Grannis is an artist. She has been before the public more than most women, and as a result she accepts the homage of her friends to a degree which (although to some it might appear slightly indiscreet) is, nevertheless, to those who know her, devoid of the shyness, that—ah—demureness which we associate with ladies not accustomed to meeting the world. I see no reason why she should not have accepted your excellent husband's kind invitation to a breath of fresh air. I am," he added, "without a car to drive Mrs. Grannis in, I regret to say."

"That is because your car was smashed in a crash with my husband's car in the park just about two hours ago."

"The car you refer to is the property of a Mr. Ben-

jamin F. Whitton, an old friend of the Grannis family. I heard about it."

The lady sat up straight and stared at him. "Why, how dare you say that? Do you deny that, immediately after the accident, you did not get out of your car and thrash Jake Brander thoroughly?"

"I do deny it."

"But the operatives reported to me that Mr. Grannis did it. I felt that sooner or later I would have to take this matter up with you, in all decency. I thought you were as much in the dark about these goings-on as I myself was—until I decided to hire some capable investigators."

"I am not at all in the dark and never was, my dear Mrs. Brander."

The wind was now completely out of Mrs. Brander's sails, so to speak. She was embarrassed. "Well, whoever it was that thrashed my husband did a workmanlike job. I should like to congratulate him. I had hoped that that beating might be in the nature of retributive justice."

Whitton smiled at her his friendly and encouraging smile, and she smiled back, a little painfully, a little shamefacedly. "Jake came back to our hotel with a tale of having been in an automobile wreck, and I believed him until I received a telephone message giving me the details."

"Of course, being a wise woman, you have said nothing to him of this."

"Heavens, no!"

"Well, may I suggest that you do not and that you immediately get Mr. Brander out of town? If he

demurs, drop me a line to the Bohemian Club and I'll see to it that he doesn't linger to pick wild flowers."

"You look big enough and bold enough to enforce your wishes," she congratulated him. "I had an idea you were one of those human doormats of husbands that a clever woman could wrap around her little finger."

"I'm wiser," said Ben Whitton, "than an old hecoon, and when aroused I'm terrible. You have succeeded to a certain extent in arousing me, and I thank you for it, my dear Mrs. Brander. It is evident to me that Mrs. Grannis has, all unwittingly, disturbed your peace of mind, and I shall see to it that you will not be disturbed in the future. I am inclined to take your view of the situation. A stitch in time very often saves nine, and I am very glad that you decided to take this matter up with me in this honest and dignified fashion." And he proffered the outraged Mrs. Brander his large, plump hand, which she accepted hesitatingly.

"Under the circumstances," he resumed, "I think you have displayed most commendable tact in consulting me. We cannot afford even the appearance of scandal and, as we both know to our sorrow, people are quick to gossip, to twist an innocent friendship into something sinister."

"Thank you, Mr. Grannis. You are very kind and helpful." Mrs. Brander appeared to be on the verge of tears. "Nevertheless, I wonder why, after the two cars crashed, Mrs. Grannis saw fit to slip out of my husband's car and disappear in the foliage. She must have felt guilty."

"She did. She and I were discussing the matter

just before you called. She felt that her prompt disappearance was a courtesy due not only to Mr. Brander but to me. She feared police investigations—reports—odious publicity. Under the circumstances, I think she acted with admirable discretion."

Mrs. Brander apparently did not think so, but courageously refrained from saying so. She rose. "Well, what's the program?" she queried.

"Mrs. Grannis will be instructed that her friendship with the Branders must not be continued, even though that mandate may appear to work a grave injustice. She is a sensible woman and will realize thoroughly the inadvisibility of distressing you further. You may safely intrust to me the delicate task of imparting to her that information and in an authoritative manner. In return may I ask, dear Mrs. Brander, that you forget the entire affair?"

"I can forget it, and it may be that Mrs. Grannis can forget it, but the question is: will Jake Brander forget it?"

"Is he at your hotel now?"

"He is, and scarcely in condition to leave it, thanks to that unknown warrior."

"Let us go to the telephone," Whitton suggested, and led her to a booth. "I'll run a blazer on him."

He got Jacob Brander on the wire. "Brander?" he demanded curtly. Receiving an affirmative reply, he went on. "Do you know who thrashed you in the park a little while ago? . . . No? Well, that's not surprising in view of the fact that you had never met me before. Now, get this and get it straight. The next time I catch you so much as raising your hat to

Mrs. Grannis that'll be another little job for the undertaker and something doing for the tombstone maker. You get out of this town and stay out. Hear me? . . . Thanks."

He turned to Mrs. Brander, who met him with a kindly, approving smile. Simulating the speech of a Chinaman, he said: "He says yes, he go, plenty quick."

"He's not accustomed to man talk, the old cake eater. I suppose he was only having a mild flirtation —all men will indulge themselves in flirtations if they get the chance. Jake has his good points, I'll admit, but——"

"I'm quite certain of it. If he did not, he could not have inspired in Mrs. Grannis such genuine admiration and liking. I understand he is an exceedingly popular man, and of course wives of such men must of necessity not begrudge them—at least a little of them—to the world. Now, you're going to keep this little affair a secret between us, aren't you?"

"I am. But if——"

"In that event, drop me a note to my club, and I'll move into action again." Once more he proffered his hand, which Mrs. Brander accepted and wrung with an almost masculine heartiness. Then he escorted her to a taxicab and returned to the Grannis apartment, where he found Julie very much on the anxious seat.

"What the devil did that woman want?" he demanded.

"Lucky thing for you I took the job off your hands. However, you took a dirty job off my hands a little while ago, and one good turn deserves another. You

will recall that the park policeman took our names following the crash?"

"Naturally."

"Well, of course, Mrs. Brander immediately discovered that one Julian Grannis had thrashed her poor husband——"

"I was afraid of that. You shouldn't have asked me to do that, Ben. Of course, I didn't know who he was——"

"Neither did I. We came together too quickly for that, and, as you know, I was knocked out for a minute and not in condition to recognize my own mother had she been present. Naturally Mrs. Brander, being a loyal and devoted wife, was mad as hops at you for decorating Jake, and came up here with the avowed intention of giving you a piece of her mind and terminating the friendship existing between the families."

"Nothing would have pleased me better. Why didn't you let her come up?"

"She was too excited, too dangerous."

"What is she like?"

"Not at all a bad sort. A little commonplace, but sincere and straight thinking. She's nobody's fool. I rather liked her, and before I got through with her I had succeeded in making her ashamed of herself. I told her the affair was most regrettable and explained all the angles of it, so she simmered down and promised she'd forget it. But she's horribly embarrassed, and as a result I imagine the Branders will go back to Pasadena immediately and you'll be spared any further social intercourse with them."

Julie was profoundly relieved. He put on his hat.

"Let's get away from here," he commanded irritably. "I'm in the midst of things I can't understand. You're the least understandable of them all, although I never knew you to be that way before. How did you know the woman was on the war path?"

"I am not quite a fool," said Ben Whitton pointedly.

"Meaning, I suppose, that I am."

"To a certain extent, old son. But I love you for all your foolishness and am always happy to smooth the way for you. By the way, you're still wearing your oldest and shabbiest suit, which you donned for a golf game that did not materialize. Slip into your Sunday suit, old innocent. The one you're wearing is a bit gory."

Dutifully, Julie retired to his bedroom to change his clothes, and almost immediately Mercedes came out, closed the door carefully behind her, and sat down on the farther side of the living room, facing Whitton.

"There was blood on the moon," he assured her, with that strange facility of his for answering a question before it was asked. "However," he added, "being a great big man, I reached up and wiped it off. The lady came around looking for a fight; she wanted to tell Julie all about you and Jake. She thinks she has succeeded because I doubled for Julie, as they say in Hollywood. Fortunately, she liked the man she thinks is your husband, so between us we cooked up a deal to save all hands the slightest embarrassment. On behalf of your husband, I promised you wouldn't see her husband again, and on behalf of her husband, she promised to do her best to see to it that her husband

doesn't see Julian Grannis' wife again. How does that program suit you, Mrs. Grannis?"

"It will have to suit me," she replied demurely, "although I must say, Mr. Whitton, I scarcely relish your unrequested and unauthorized interference in the domestic affairs of Julian and myself."

"I did it to spare my friend. I wouldn't have the hardihood to obtrude my really efficient services upon you without solicitation. That businesslike Mrs. Brander has had detectives on the trail of you and Jacob."

She almost fainted, and he sat watching her terror and enjoying it. "I've had the dicks called off; the Branders leave in a day or two for home, and a resolute effort is to be made to forget it. Mrs. Brander knows all about the affair in the park this morning; she had an impression that Julie had thrashed her husband until she met me, whereupon, of course, she jumped to the conclusion that I was Julie and forthwith attempted to congratulate me for my brisk action. I denied having thrashed Jake but declined to tell her the name of the man who did. But Jake knows now that your husband polished him off. He got the name from the traffic officer. And your husband knows that he polished off Jake. What Jake doesn't know, however, is that you know Julie did the dirty work, and what Julie doesn't know is that you know he did it—all of which is a bit involved and confusing but highly satisfactory from a number of angles."

"Julie doesn't know I was in the car with Mr. Brander?"

"Of course not. I saw to that. And I've saved you

a wretched scene with Mrs. Brander and your husband. In fact, I'm the best little boy scout I know of. A boy scout has to do only one good deed a day—and all day long I've been doing nothing else but, and all I've received for my exceedingly adroit work is a polite bawling out from you and a total lack of any expression of thanks from Julie."

"I am grateful, of course, Mr. Whitton. While there has never been a thing that I could be ashamed of or that Mrs. Brander could use to base a charge of unladylike or underhanded conduct, still, had it not been for you, a very ugly scene might have been enacted."

"You would have had hysterics in earnest, my dear."

She bridled instantly. "How do you know I ever have hysterics, or, having them, that they are not in earnest?"

"I know a four-flusher when I see him—or her."

"You are exceedingly rude, Mr. Whitton."

"Not to my friends. I never spare my enemies. When mine enemy smites me on one cheek he had better duck or cover up both his own, because I always sock him." He chuckled genially, and Mercedes thought she had never met a man more hateful. A cold fury possessed her, but she dared not express it. He was too diabolically clever, too unawed. She could have bitten him when he spoke again:

"You have your orders from your husband, Mrs. Grannis, and now you're going to get them from me. I made Mrs. Brander certain promises, and I would not be pleased to discover you had violated them. Lay off the Brander family or stand by for

a lot of dark-blue trouble. That Mrs. Brander will sue Jake for a divorce and name you as corespondent if you're seen with him again." Under the stimulus of a sudden inspiration or his amazing capacity for bluff, he added: "She has enough on you to hang you, and if she hasn't her private detectives will invent it. She'll sue you for alienation of affections and ruin you with horrible publicity. She'll ruin Julie, too. Then he'll sue you for a divorce and His Honor will tell you to take your little old fiddle and earn your own living without any help from Julie."

"What a dismal picture you paint!" she replied with a faint sneer. Nevertheless the man saw that she was with difficulty concealing a mental earthquake.

"Speaking of fiddles," he went on. "I have never heard you play. Suppose you get out the agony box and scrape me off a few simple melodies, such as No Bird Ever Flew So High That He Didn't Come Down to Roost; Yes, Sir, That's My Baby; or It Ain't No Disgrace to Run When You're Afraid."

"I'll play May Irwin's Bully Song," she almost snapped at him and he applauded silently. She got out her violin because she was afraid not to; her mood of savagery caused her to play with a verve, a vitality, she had never shown before.

"By the gods, you *can* play," Ben declared admiringly.

Julie had come to the door. He was buttoning on his collar. "You bet she can play," he affirmed pridefully, "although, for some strange reason, she puts more pep into playing for you than she does for me. You're feeling better, Mercy. I'm glad."

"On Sunday evenings," Whitton went on deliberately, "my friends have a habit of dropping in. I keep open house. Mercedes—you'll permit me that familiarity, will you not?—it will please me very much if you will come with Julie and me."

"Not this evening, Ben, I'm not quite up to it."

"I think an old friend of yours will be there with her mother: Gloria Justin. She tells me she went to the same convent with you."

"Indeed? I have forgotten her, but it will be delightful to meet her again, Ben. I do wish I felt that I could enjoy myself this evening. If you were not going to have company—" She paused and looked at her husband, the dawn of a bright idea showing in her fine eyes. "Julie, there's going to be company at Ben's. You mustn't go. You look too awful, with those court-plaster patches on your face. And you have more than a suspicion of a black eye."

He hesitated, for the habit of obedience was strong in him; he had learned of old the futility of opposing his wife once her mind was made up. "I suppose you're right, Mercy; I hadn't thought of my battle-scarred face."

"And your hands, Julie," she pursued, quick to change his retreat into a rout. "Everybody will know you've been fighting."

Julie looked at his discolored, swollen hands. "By George, that's so, Ben."

"Gloria will be disappointed," his friend suggested, "and so will her mother. They both frequently recall with pleasure the occasions when you used to dine at their house."

"I'll go," said Julie with determination.

"Julie! You are shameless. You must not go. You're in a perfectly frightful condition."

"In fact," Ben went on ruminatively, "I invited Gloria and her mother especially to-night because I felt certain of my ability to induce you and Mercy to come also. However, since Mercy cannot come, I must be a brute and insist that you come, all dishonored as you are, and I'll not insist upon Mercy changing her mind, because I know she cannot help but feel embarrassed when she looks at you, you plug-ugly."

"I'll go," Julie repeated.

"Julie!" His wife's voice had the monitory tone of a schoolmistress addressing a refractory pupil. "I protest against it."

"I'm going to serve chicken tamales and prewar beer, Julie," the demon Whitton interjected slyly. "You know how fond you used to be of chicken tamales and beer. . . . Remember, when we were boys at Stanford, the jolly feasts we used to have?"

"I'm going," Julie announced, and go he did. Mercy knew when she had lost a battle. She longed to go with him at the last, if only to protect him from Gloria Justin, but Ben had checkmated her there. That woman! She had had the audacity to sit with Julie the previous night at dinner. She was Ben Whitton's secretary, and to-morrow she would be Julie's also. What sort of men were these two, anyhow? Treating a secretary as a social equal! That loathsome Ben Whitton! How deliberately now, without even extending himself, he had matched his wits and his diplomacy against hers and defeated her. Why, the

wretch was playing with her, proving to her that she had lost control over her husband, defying her.

Julie was happy again, happy in a belief that, after all, his wife was going to like old Ben, dear old Ben, the best friend any man ever had. Why, she had played for him—played for him better than he had ever heard her play before—and he knew her well enough to realize she never played for those she disliked. Now that Mercy had had an opportunity to discover what a golden-hearted man Ben Whitton was, Julie felt that he was going to have far more social enjoyment of his friend than he had anticipated.

His heart glowed; the last flicker of apprehension, of the indefinite suspicion that had enveloped him regarding Mercedes and the impossible Brander, fled his mercurial soul, and as he rolled along in a taxi with Ben toward the latter's apartment he laid his hand suddenly on the great leg beside him.

"Dog-gone you, Ben," he declared fervently, "I think a lot of you."

Ben ignored the affectionate little outburst. He was thinking of the yearning of this man for peace, for comfort, for love and sympathy and understanding, for coöperation and frankness, for freedom from feminine diplomacy and deceit, for the right to call his soul his own, to indulge in his innocent and unworldly delights without offense to his wife, without explanation, without apology or deprecation. What appalling things the wrong kind of wife could do to the right kind of husband.

In Ben's apartment, they talked man talk until six-thirty when Gloria Justin and her mother arrived.

Julie ran to the door to admit them. "Ma Justin," he cried to the old lady, "come into my arms till I squeeze you."

He squeezed her and kissed her. "Hello, Gloria. Wanted to kiss you when I first met you yesterday, for old sake's sake, but it didn't seem right to do it in Ben's office." He put his arm around her in comradely fashion, drew her face up to his and kissed her on both cheeks. "We're going to have a glorious evening, my dear."

"Is Mercedes here, Julie?"

"No. Indisposed."

They looked into each other's eyes and Gloria knew why they were going to have a glorious evening. Yes, glorious for Julie, but for her—well, that was another story. What a dear, lovable, stupid creature he was—the sweet old thing. She had an impulse to pat his cheek and yielded to it; he seemed pleased, and while Ben assisted her mother to remove her wrap and escorted her to a seat by the fire, Gloria and Julie stood in the hall, apparently loath to follow. The girl eyed his patched features critically, marked the faint discoloration under one eye, then lifted his hands and gazed at them pensively. But she said nothing, and just because she had that much tact the soul of Julian Grannis suddenly surged with a fierce, wild longing to—to—to—well, to do something. While he was striving to make up his mind how properly to express his admiration and appreciation of a woman who could observe a ripe topic of conversation and yet repress a desire to indulge it, he remembered he was a married man.

CHAPTER VI

As Ben Whitton stirred cocktails in a silver bucket, he beamed brightly upon his guests, observing that Julian Grannis was, for the moment, a fair imitation of his old, sunny, care-free self. What charm the old boy possessed! Ben, who had the sort of charm which is not readily observable—the sort, rather, that one has to excavate to find—was inordinately proud of his friend and fiercely resentful of those who seemed not to appreciate him. Gloria Justin and her mother appeared to be appreciating him now; he knew Julie was happy in renewing his contact with them, and he hoped nobody else would drop in casually, as usual, to disrupt this pleasant little party.

How strange life was! Ben reflected. Here were the Jacob Branders, the Grannises, Gloria and himself all more or less sentimentally connected and all more or less unhappy about it; with the exception of Julie, who, by all the rights of common sense, should be the unhappiest of all. Nevertheless the idiot was floating in a seventh heaven of bliss. Ben couldn't quite understand him. He knew that men and women capable of capturing a great joy are, conversely, capable of capturing a great sorrow. Apparently, Julie had not as yet captured either, and was in a sort of agreeable limbo, ready to pop to heaven or hell as his

destiny might decide; but in the interim resolutely resolved to make the best of everything.

Ben stirred the ice mechanically, his thoughts on Mercy Grannis and Mrs. Jake Brander. He compared the two women. To the world, Mercy would inevitably at first sight be decreed a lady. She possessed that fastidious nature which caused her to revolt against the commonplace; she had everything save sincerity and sympathy. Mrs. Brander, on the other hand, was obviously at first sight not a lady. Nevertheless Ben had liked her. She was not in revolt against the commonplace; she possessed a certain belligerency; she was tactless. But she did possess a rough understanding that might predicate sympathy. At any rate, she appeared to understand her husband and, to a certain extent, excuse his lapses from the code of conventionality. And she was sincere. Ben held that one could always recognize sincerity in a silent handshake.

He glanced covertly at Gloria. Not pretty, not beautiful, but—lovely! Gloria had the charm that comes of high intelligence, of instinctive balance, of sincerity, sympathy and understanding. She had a broad sense of equity; she was brave—too brave and too fine to be catty. She was what Ben called a handsome woman, in that she had a fine skin, regular features, beautiful hair and beautiful eyes and teeth. A good listener too: quiet without being mousy, possessed of a sense of humor that kept in her fine eyes a perpetual little smile. A sizable woman, too. Ben was intolerant of little, ultrafeminine, hundred-and-ten-pound women, as a rule; indeed, he was a trifle afraid of them. As he looked at Gloria he saw she had eyes for no one in the

room save Julie. She hung upon his lightest word, a faint flush suffusing her cheeks; he saw that her hands were trembling faintly.

Damnation! Oh, why had that ass Julie rejected this prize that had always been his for the asking? Ben's heart ached for her. He wanted her to be happy. Once, he had had a sneaking idea that he would like to be the man to make her happy but, with his rare sense of perception, he had realized in time that he could never possibly be aught to her save a friend. Affection she would always grant him, but never the love his silent, repressed nature craved. Without envy or jealousy, without remorse for what might have been, he had stifled his dreams with the same ruthlessness he would have manifested in passing upon an engineering problem he could not afford to sponsor. Yes, he was engineer-trained to look facts in the face and act accordingly.

Curiously enough, from his renunciation he had gleaned a species of sad joy. He was a man who, in the parlance of the West, always let the tail go with the hide; he was incapable of a half sacrifice or a sacrifice with reservations. There were no ifs in his contracts. If he couldn't be happy himself, he greatly desired happiness for others, particularly to those dear to him. Nor could he give his deepest friendship to one he did not greatly admire; once having given of it, his first thought was to cherish that which he was awarded in exchange.

Both Julie and Gloria were very fond of him, and in his curious, silent way he felt grateful to them for this, as if, indeed, he were the recipient of some-

thing he did not remotely deserve; that they should show a marked preference for his society was always provocative of faint wonder! His heart held two emotions now—sympathy for Gloria and a subdued rage at Julie. What an omelet the man had made of both their lives! Yet to-day it had been in Ben Whitton's power to have unscrambled that omelet! All he had to do would have been to sit still and be stupid; nature would have taken her inevitable course, and when at last the dust had settled, Julie might have been free. Of course, he would have suffered dreadfully, and because of that Ben had interjected himself into the affair. Julie was still mad about his wife; he had to be protected.

Well, the woman was worse than a fool, and Ben was sufficiently worldly-wise to know that nobody can protect a fool indefinitely. He knew Mercedes was slowly killing her husband's love; that secretly she despised him for a dreamer, a weakling; that she resented his inability to fight his way to a place in the sun with other men, but more than that she resented his sublime indifference to the competition. Well, perhaps Mercy might succeed in alienating Julie's love sooner than he, Ben, suspected, and in that event, whatever happened to the Grannises could not be conducive of incurable heartbreak. It would be a nine days' wonder; then Julie would gather himself together, so to speak, and proceed to rehabilitate his life. And then—Gloria might catch him on the rebound!

Well, Ben would hope so, at any rate. That would be best for them both. A little happiness, delayed in transit, he reflected, is better than a lifelong sense

of deprivation, a never-ending regret for lost opportunities. . . . The biggest and ripest strawberries are always found at the top of the box, but they are seldom the sweetest.

Julie was speaking. He was talking shop. Ben ground his teeth. The man's profession—his fantastic dreams of success in solving vast problems connected with it—were never far from the top of his agile tongue. What did these women know—or care—for such profound twaddle? And then he saw that Gloria was interested; that her interest showed in her eyes; not for a ripe peach would she have interrupted. . . .

The doorbell rang, and the arrival of half a dozen of Ben's friends interrupted further exposition of Julie's plan to produce synthetic thunderbolts. Introductions, cocktails, tamales, beer and conversation followed. Ben was busy with his guests and had no further time for reflection.

"A man is so utterly helpless without a woman to manage his parties," Gloria protested. "Shall I be mamma, Ben?"

"Do, please," he pleaded. "There'll be chaos in the kitchen if you do not."

Julie dashed over to them. "I'll help," he volunteered.

"You'll only constitute yourself a nuisance, Julie, old son."

"He'll not," said Gloria decisively. "Julie, you come with me. A kitchen is the best place I know of to get acquainted—and Julie and I are getting acquainted again."

Ben's inscrutable gaze caught hers and held it for a moment. Then he nodded—briefly and understandingly—and Gloria blushed. She thrust her hand out suddenly and captured his huge index finger; she came close to him and whispered: "Something has happened, Ben. He isn't himself. He's worried and unhappy. Let me work on him."

He nodded affirmatively, and a small lump rose in his throat. How the devil did Gloria know something had happened? He hadn't told her. And how the devil did she know Julie was worried and unhappy? Ben had been watching the man and would have sworn Julie hadn't been so happy, so utterly at ease, so childishly content in three years. And yet Gloria knew . . . well, the ways of women were beyond him. Did Mercedes ever know when her husband's mental thermometer was below zero? Or didn't she care?

They had a buffet supper, the guests, assisted by Ben, Julie and Gloria, helping themselves. It was a delightful evening, for Ben always selected his friends with fine discrimination. The wit, the merriment, the bright—at times brilliant—conversation, the songs, the food, all captivated Julie. He expanded.

It had been so long since he had met the sort of people his lonely heart yearned for. It occurred to him, with the impact of a savage blow, that he had been socially and intellectually starved for a long, long time, but almost instantly he was ashamed of the thought because it implied disloyalty to his wife.

At ten thirty Ben sent him home in a taxi with Gloria and her mother, and stood at the window watching them roll down the street. The evening had been

a success. His friends had enjoyed themselves and each other, and he had enjoyed them all. Good thing for Julie to meet people again. How the old boy had expanded! When Julie told some whimsical tale of men he had met, of their experiences or his own, Ben had observed that the other guests paid him the tribute of silence and eager appreciation. Julie told a story wonderfully . . . excellent choice of words, never halting, never commonplace, always witty without seeming to strain for it, never striving to captivate.

"I jumped him out of himself, I think—or perhaps Gloria did. How she loves him—and he doesn't even suspect it! Well, never you mind, Glory, dear. I'm out to make you happy . . . something tells me I'll succeed yet. . . ."

He changed into dressing gown and slippers, lighted his pipe and sat down before the fire to dream. Suddenly the doorbell rang. His Chinese servant had long since retired, so Ben opened the door himself. Julie had returned.

"I observed, Ben, that you have a guest chamber, so I thought I'd come back and sleep here to-night," he announced in his casual way.

"There's a dressing robe and slippers in the closet, old son. I have some extra pipes."

When Julie returned to the living room he said, apropos of nothing, "Lordy, Ben, but you live a happy life."

Ben Whitton had an inspired thought: "I suppose Mercedes made a number of dear friends in Los Angeles and will go down to visit them, I daresay, from

time to time. When she does, move your little tin trunk and your old straw suitcase over here and enjoy yourself until her return."

"I will. Isn't Gloria the most wonderful woman you ever met, Ben?"

"I don't know." Whitton's deep voice rumbled out almost complainingly. "She's a dear, nice girl, of course, but I can't say I ever thought of her as wonderful. Good home type. Make a man more comfortable than most, I imagine."

"You're a confirmed bachelor, Ben—iconoclastic, selfish and with as much appreciation of a really extraordinary woman as a bear might have." Julie was almost vindictive. "There you sit, the embodiment of contentment——"

"And there you sit, the embodiment of discontent and unhappiness, trapped like a damned rat," Ben roared at him. "You're a pussyfooter, a slave, a sidestepper, without backbone, without liberty, without choice in anything: lonely, starved for human society and unable to get it. You dwell in an atmosphere of politeness, of cold sunlight; you put up with things rather than change them by a brutal and ferocious insistence on your rights. You're henpecked, and you're here with me to-night because you're afraid to go home. If you had any brains, you'd divorce Mercedes and marry Gloria Justin. You were a dog to turn her down in the first place."

"I—I—we were never engaged," Julie pleaded. Ben's outburst had overwhelmed him.

"There are certain rare souls who do not have to go through the mummery of an engagement. To the

devil with that old chatter of a formal courtship, a formal proposal, a formal acceptance, a formal marriage and a formal formless married life thereafter. You love Gloria. She loves you. You went away and forgot her and in a moment of sticky, sickly, horrible, drippy sentimentality—when your mind and your body were at the zero hour of resistance—you married this fiddling woman who, from the very start, has juggled you as awkwardly as a bear cub juggles nine hazelnuts, and you haven't even discovered it as yet.

"Loyalty! Loyalty! With you, loyalty amounts to a positive vice. Giving and never taking, bending and never breaking, working and never saving, talking and never saying anything, growing old and unhappy and all the old chores to do, over and over and over, until at last you lie down and hold your peace while your widow proceeds to Europe on your life insurance. Doesn't life mean anything to you, Julie, you poor, abandoned waif? Doesn't it ever occur to you——

"Sorry, Julie. I've talked too much. Premature explosion. Forgive me."

His great hand went out and touched his friend's knee in a sort of gentle accolade.

"Nothing to forgive, old son. Can't read a man out of the party for telling the truth—and one's friends seldom tell one what's happening until after the crash. . . . Yes, I'm afraid to go home. I've forgotten things for a little while to-night—people always dislike leaving the spot where they've been happy: they always like to come back. Perfectly natural, you know. . . . So you don't like Mercedes?"

"I loathe admitting it, but I do not. She doesn't like me. It's a social gap that can't be bridged—so hereafter, Julie, when you yearn to wallow in the mud of my presence, you'll have to call on me. I made my last call on you to-day."

"I suppose I ought to have a falling out with you because of that last statement." Julie grinned painfully. "But that would be ruinous. I don't think I'm ever going to be very happy, but now that we understand each other so thoroughly, there would be a certain amount of tautology in discussing this subject again. What puzzles me, however, is why you should be so angry with me."

"Because you're an ass!" Ben's voice was rising again.

"I know that. I think you ought to feel a little sorry for an ass. Life isn't so sweet for any of us, and——"

"And I've spoiled your little hour of sweetness. I'm sorry, Julie. Brutal of me."

Julie smiled radiantly. "No, you haven't, Ben. Nobody and nothing in the world could spoil it now. God forgive me, I've fallen in love with Gloria."

"Not—again?"

"No, not again. Just picked up the line of march where I made my last halt."

"This is interesting. I hope you didn't say anything to Gloria about it."

"Die first."

"Do you suppose she has any of the old sentiment left for you?"

"I hope not."

"Why do you hope not, Useless?"

"Because the whole situation is so hopeless. Beans all spilled, Butch. Never can be gathered again."

Whitton stood up and stared down at his friend. "You were never truly in love with Mercedes, Julie," he charged. "You were just infatuated and spoke out of your turn; then your dreadful, exalted sense of honor, your reverence for your word once given, moved you to go through with the deal. If her nature had not been eternally in conflict with yours, it is more than possible that you might have been happy with her. If she took care of you, thought of you tenderly and unselfishly occasionally; if she played the game with you, coöperated—you might have had reason to be grateful to the Fates for sending her your way. But the deal didn't pan out, and you've been unhappy."

"I've played the game," Julie maintained. "And I *have* loved her. I love her yet with a love of sorts. I could be happy with her, faithful to her—but she doesn't understand life. She's childish."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Julie?"

"Nothing. Just carry on."

"Will that not be a bit dangerous—with Gloria in your employ?"

Julie shook his head. He was the captain of his soul. Trust him to carry on.

"Have you discussed your future plans with Gloria?"

"Oh, yes."

"Told her all about your cunning scheme to blow in your fortune in one gigantic electrical experiment?"

"Yes."

"What did Gloria say to that?"

"Urged me to go to it. Seemed to think I might win, but win, lose or draw she thought I'd be happier for having made the experiment. She reminded me of the fact that it is rather terrible to wish for something with all your heart all your life and never realize it, never have a fair chance at it."

"Yes, that's rather terrible," Ben admitted dryly. "'Shoot, Luke, or give up the gun!' That's a man's motto. And if you have to give it up, don't whine about it."

"I loathe whiners, Ben."

"Well, do you still think you're going to make an average success of your married life, despite—er—ah—everything?"

"Going to try like everything, Butch. I realize that Mercedes is a bit unhappy, but the fault is far from all hers. I'm a difficult fellow to get along with. Dull as dishwater for a woman to be cooped up with a man like me."

"As I understand the situation," Ben shot back at him, "she hasn't been cooped up with you for the past two years."

"Year and a half," Julie corrected him loyally, and Ben smiled his grim little smile.

"I have already said too much, and I have nothing more to say, Julie. Nightcap?"

"No, thanks."

"Then clear off to bed. I'm going to sit up and smoke, and I want to be alone to do some solid thinking."

"Ungracious, inhospitable animal! Where's your

telephone? I must inform Mercedes I'm not coming home to-night, otherwise she'll worry—think I've been slugged by a bandit or struck by a taxicab."

"I'll telephone her, Julie. Save argument."

"That's an idea," his friend agreed, and trotted off to bed.

Ben called up Mercedes. "Ben Whitton speaking, Mercedes," he announced cordially. "I thought it might be a good idea if you were left alone to-night. It's been a trying day, and you've got to have time to get set for to-morrow. So I'm keeping Julie at my digs to-night."

"Thanks, Ben," she replied, genuinely grateful. "You're very kind and thoughtful, and I'll never be able to catch even with you. If you were only a little bit kinder——"

He hung up, for he wasn't interested in her reactions.

He possessed an eight-day clock which he wound on Sunday nights. He possessed also a wire-haired fox terrier. So he wound the clock now and put the terrier out on the back porch and went ponderously to bed.

A plain man. A man who earned a little and spent a little less; who made a few friends and kept them without capitulation; who made, upon the whole, the world happier for his presence; who could renounce when that should be necessary and not be embittered. Yes, quite a man!

Jacob Brander, after seeing to it that a wrecking crew had removed the wreckage of Ben Whitton's car, climbed into his own car, which, although badly bat-

tered, could still be operated, and motored slowly away from the scene of the wreck. The disappearance of his quondam companion bothered him not; indeed, the fact that she had had sufficient tact to disappear without giving her name served but to increase his admiration for her. The traffic policeman had handed him a leaf, torn from a notebook, upon which the officer had written the names and addresses of the two men in the car he had so stupidly wrecked, but in his hurry to flee the scene Brander had thrust the piece of paper into his pocket unread.

Arrived at his hotel, he summoned the house physician, who patched him up and applied leeches to his discolored eyes. Mrs. Brander, fortunately, was not in, so when the doctor departed Brander lit a cigar and decided to read the names on the little slip of paper.

Then, for the first time in his care-free career, Jacob Brander experienced a thrill of genuine fright. He had always been afraid of husbands; indeed, a husband no bigger than Tom Thumb was something to be avoided and respected, and until he had met Mercedes Grannis and become infatuated with her, he had never had cause to worry on the score of a husband. He trembled, and a great weakness came over him now as he read the name of Julian Grannis, witness, and Benjamin F. Whitton, owner of the car.

Mercedes had told him her husband was going into partnership with Whitton, so of course the man who had thrashed him was Mercedes' husband. Could it be possible the fellow had become suspicious of his wife and had used the incident of the wreck as an excuse to vent his spleen? Was this thrashing merely a tactful

warning? Did it indicate that the next time Grannis caught him and Mrs. Grannis together the matter might be argued in the smoke? Brander shuddered. No wonder Mercedes had fled—doubtless while her husband was busy pummeling him!

He tried to think back, to connect every detail. Within thirty seconds following the crash he had been defending himself against Grannis. Had Grannis recognized his wife as Brander's companion? Had she escaped before he had time to recognize her? Had Whitton recognized her? If he had, would he tell his friend? Brander pondered this latter contingency long and agonizedly and concluded that Whitton would not. Men disliked being the bearers of unwelcome news; undoubtedly Whitton would protect his friend if, by any possibility, he could do so. No man wantonly relates a tale that may result in a divorce.

The thought comforted Brander a little. However, he realized Grannis must discover the identity of the man he had attacked and, of course, that was going to be embarrassing enough in itself, particularly if Mrs. Brander should discover it—and, of course, she was bound to discover that somebody had attacked him.

He carefully destroyed the piece of paper with the two names and addresses and sat down to suffer silently. Presently the telephone rang, and with a sinking heart he answered it. Mercedes was on the wire.

"Are you all alone?" she queried.

"Yes, yes."

"I'm telephoning from a candy store out near the park. Sit tight! Julie didn't see me, or, seeing me,

did not recognize me. Whitton did, but he will not tell. I'll patch the situation up somehow, Jacob. Don't worry. Good-by."

"What a woman!" Mr. Brander murmured approvingly. "What a woman!" Instantly fifty per cent of his perturbation fled his soul. Five minutes later the other fifty per cent followed, for Mr. Brander had arrived at a decision. He would tell the truth—at least as much of it as he deemed prudent to tell—and shame the devil. So he ordered up some ice and a bottle of mineral water and mixed himself a highball; while sipping it thoughtfully, his telephone rang again.

This time it was Ben Whitton, doubling for Julian Grannis; and excusing his mendacity on the ground that his act would bring peace and comfort to all concerned. The reader is already familiar with Mr. Whitton's ultimatum; after having listened to it, Jacob Brander felt so weak he mixed another highball, in the hope that it would stimulate his brain to evolve a new plan for meeting a new situation. He decided that Mercedes was entirely too optimistic; assuredly this was a situation beyond her power to patch, somehow. Her husband knew everything, and while for reasons best known to himself he had elected not to discuss the matter with his wife, there was no doubt that he meant business where Jacob Brander was concerned.

"The thing for me to do," Brander decided, "is to get out of this town and stay out—for a while, at least. The situation is binding."

Ten minutes later his wife came in. She paused just inside the door and looked him over with amused

interest. "Why, darling," she cooed, "you've been playing with bad boys, and they've fed you into a concrete mixer."

She was in rare good humor. That comforted him. He grinned at her like a gargoyle. "Entirely my fault. Inexcusable. But I lost my temper and said something that infuriated the man who was driving with the owner of the car I wrecked, so he hopped out and before you could say Jack Robinson he was all over me like a circus tent. Got two home on my jaw before I could defend myself; that made me groggy, and he polished me off to the queen's taste."

"Did you secure his name? Of course, you'll pay for the damage to the car, but this other man should be arrested and fined for assault and battery. I insist that you prosecute the wretch."

Apparently Mrs. Brander was quite up in arms in her husband's defense. In reality, she had decided to play him a little.

"Can't, old lady. Peculiar situation. The chap that worked over me is Julian Grannis, husband of our friend Mercedes Grannis. He hadn't the slightest idea who I was, and I had never met him—peculiar situation, so, of course, my hands are tied. The man's a perfect devil."

"What sort of man is he, Jake?"

"A great big brute. He must be three inches taller and six inches broader and forty pounds heavier than me," he lied in defense of his masculine pride. "He's a regular heavyweight champion."

"What's come over Jake?" his wife thought. "He's telling the truth at last."

"But didn't you have any friend with you to take your part?" she pursued sympathetically.

"Unfortunately I was all alone. I hadn't a chance."

Mrs. Brander removed her wrap and hat and sat down. "This is most unfortunate and embarrassing, Jake," she declared. "How can we ever face Mrs. Grannis again?"

"Search me, darling."

"The best plan," she decided, "is for you to receive a telegram calling you south to-morrow."

"Darling," he assured her, "you're the wisest woman I know. We will leave this city to-morrow and sort of forget the Grannis family."

"My, how that huge Julian Grannis has frightened him!" his wife soliloquized. "That telephone warning did the trick." She was instantly disgusted with her spouse, for no woman likes to think she has married a jellyfish. Her resentment aroused, she decided to bait him.

"Where did this accident occur?"

"In the park."

"What were you doing in the park?"

"Just taking the air."

"Taking it alone?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you ask me to go with you? You told me you had a business engagement."

"I had, but after completing it, I thought I'd take a spin——"

"You lie, you great, fat, cowardly creature!" The lady, obeying the dictates of her nature, was moving into action. "You had Mercedes Grannis with you,

and that's why her husband thrashed you, and if he catches you out with her again, you crooked philanderer, he'll make a widow of me, and God bless him for it.

"I've had detectives following you, Jake," she charged, "and now I have other witnesses. I've just come from a conference with Mr. Grannis; in fact, I listened to him telephoning to you ten minutes ago. You're an invertebrate. You haven't the courage of a mouse or you'd defy him. I couldn't continue to live with a mouse-man, and I want a divorce from you, and I want it quick and without any fuss and feathers. I can't live with a liar and a cheat and a home breaker."

"My dear—my dear——"

"I'm going to sue you for divorce and name that Persian cat, Mercedes Grannis, as corespondent. I'll smear her. I'll teach her to run around with other women's husbands, when she's got the finest husband a woman ever had."

She saw that she had terrified him and continued to batter him ruthlessly. "Of course, Mr. Grannis will then divorce his wife and you can have her then —maybe—and provided the judgment Mr. Grannis will get against you on a suit for alienation of affections——"

"You may have your divorce," he promised hoarsely. "Without fuss and feathers and as quickly as we can establish a residence in Paris. We'll fix it up somehow, and I'll give you a decent settlement, provided you don't drag the Grannises into it. There has been nothing save a lovely Platonic friendship between Mercedes and me, I assure you.

"Get your divorce on any other grounds, and I'll play ball. Start throwing dirt, and I'll fight you to a finish and defeat you. You haven't got anything on me that will entitle you to a divorce. You cannot prove that I have been unfaithful or unkind or that I have failed to support you adequately or neglected you. The only charge you can bring against me in court in this country would be mental cruelty, and the judge may not agree with you that my conduct constitutes mental cruelty. He may elect to call it jealousy and tell you to get over it."

She realized he was right, and she knew that even a rat will fight and fight well when cornered. However, notwithstanding her promise made to Ben Whitton, she had violated it, yielding to the dictates of her nature. She could never trust Jake again; they could never again dwell together in amity; the separation must come sooner or later, so why not have it come now when she had the drop on him, when he would make her a settlement which, added to a small income of her own, would place her in security?

"You're a fathead, Jake," she assured him. "One of these days you'll find yourself so broke you'll rattle when you walk, so I'm going to give you the air while you still have something left. I want $250,000 in bonds, and don't you try to fool me with any of those bad ones you've accumulated from time to time. That's the price for keeping mum about the Grannis woman."

"I accept your terms," he mumbled.

"So glad you're sensible. Now, listen to further orders. You pack and take the train south this eve-

ning. I'll remain here, see that the two damaged cars are repaired and the repairs paid for, and follow with the chauffeur later. As soon as you get home my lawyer will present an agreement for you to sign, and then he will inspect your list of bond holdings. He'll select the bonds I should feel safe in accepting, and you will pay him his professional fee.

"I promised Mr. Grannis I'd forget this escapade of yours and give you another trial, but I know it's useless. I can't be a hypocrite, and I can't live with a hypocrite. If I'm fool enough to go on with you I'll come to a sorry end."

Her tears commenced falling, and she fumbled in her hand bag for her handkerchief. "That Mr. Grannis is too fine for that wife of his," she went on. "Oh, Jake, if you were only one-half as fine and faithful and loyal, what a happy woman I'd be!"

"Oh, well, why do you keep it up?" Brander complained miserably. "You've said your say, you've made your deal, and it's been closed. I'm content. You and I couldn't hope to get along together indefinitely."

"Very well, Jake; I'll not say any more, except to give you a friendly tip. You keep away from Mercedes Grannis or her husband will do things to you. Can't you see, Jake, that she's a cold, calculating, designing woman? The only woman that could interest you would play a ukulele and sing coon songs and do the Black Bottom; you like 'em blond with cornflower eyes—ones with a sudden, wistful way of grabbing you by the sleeve and murmuring faintly, 'Oh, I think you're simply dee-*vine,* Mr. Brander!' "

"I certainly got a pill when I got you!" he growled.

"You busted up a mighty good dressmaking business: that's what you did. And that was one thing I could manage successfully."

She subsided into a large chair and commenced to weep softly for no particular reason, for she was far from broken-hearted. It is probable that her tears fell into the grave of her few simple ideals.

Silently and morosely Jacob Brander packed his trunk and bags; he wrote his wife a check for a substantial sum to cover any expense she might be put to, took his hat, overcoat and stick and prepared to go.

"Well, I'm going," he announced.

"Who's holding you?"

"Don't you want to say good-by?"

"Oh, run along, Jake. Don't be sentimental. I'll meet you in a courtroom in France. You know very well you're happy to get rid of me; that you consider the job cheap at the price. I only wish you one bit of luck: I hope you get over your infatuation for Mercedes Grannis. You're no good, Jake, but bad as you are you don't deserve her."

"She's a good woman," he defended. "As good as you are."

"The only reason she is as good as I am is because she hasn't found sin profitable as yet."

"Oh, go take a jump in the lake," he retorted wearily, whereupon his wife picked up a gold traveling clock and hurled it at him. It shivered against the door as it closed behind him. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Brander was not quite a lady, but undoubtedly, as Ben Whitton had discovered, she was very sincere.

CHAPTER VII

TEN o'clock Monday morning Julian Grannis got up in Ben Whitton's guest chamber, went out and strolled downtown to Ben Whitton's tailor, where he ordered such a wardrobe as he had never dreamed of possessing.

Next, he went to a haberdasher's shop and with ruinous prodigality ordered a dozen fine shirts made to order—something he had never done before. He reveled in the purchase of new and expensive ties, socks and handkerchiefs; in a shoe store he purchased six pairs of shoes, and, in the knowledge that he could do all this without a thought for his bank account or his old age, he gleaned a thrill of juvenile delight.

His purchases completed, he went back to his hotel, arriving there about twelve thirty. Mercedes was still abed, reading a novel, and the remains of her breakfast occupied a portable table by her bedside. He looked at her with frank disapproval and thought that she reminded him of a well-fed and contented cat, basking in comfort. But there was about her too an atmosphere of carelessness, of indolence, and he resented this. Why did she have to let herself go this way?

She read the disapproval in his silence, in his all-encompassing glance about the room. "Your eye is

worse, darling," she reminded him casually. "Have a good time at Ben's?"

"Wonderful. Met some delightful people there."

"Who were they?"

He enumerated them. At mention of Gloria Justin and her mother his wife's face clouded a little. "I wonder why Ben will be so commonplace as to have his secretary a guest at his parties," she mused.

"My dear, Gloria Justin was never reared with the expectation that she would have to work for a living. She was a friend of Ben's years ago, and so was her mother. When she had to earn her own living and support her mother, Ben was kind enough to give her a job in his office. If he had not had the job to give and if she had not made good in it, she would not be in his office. But the fact that she is doesn't appear to Ben to offer grounds for depriving her of his respect and friendship or of depriving him of the privilege of being kind and hospitable."

"Well, I think it's awful funny, Julie."

"Your thoughts on the subject are in such a pitiful minority among those who know Gloria and Ben that I'm not even interested in discussing the matter. You know how I dislike to hear you criticize my friends."

"Oh, you and your friends! What friends have you? I haven't seen more than two or three since we married, and I must say they didn't impress me."

"I know that," he replied sadly. "And I greatly fear you did not impress them." He dragged the breakfast table across the room and sat down on the side of her bed. "Let's have a little plain, friendly

discussion, Mercy," he began. "You're not very happy with me, are you?"

"Why, darling! How *can* you say such a thing? Of course I am. Why do you ask that terrible question?"

"Because it has seemed to me that you aren't happy with me, that I bore you, that we haven't an interest in common, except a mutual love for good music. When a little patience and bravery was expected of you, you quit. You wouldn't be bored living up in the mountains with me, although your place was with me——"

"Julie, dear, please do not preach. I can stand anything except being talked at—talked down to, as if I were a mischievous child."

"Don't evade the argument, Mercy. Please do not beg the question. You ask me why I ask you an extraordinary question and when I attempt to answer you truthfully and the answer hurts, you interrupt and beg me not to preach to you. Now, I asked you if you were quite happy with me——"

"But I answered your question, darling."

"Yes, you said you were quite happy with me, Mercy, but sometimes it seems to me that you are merely putting up with a bad bargain, tolerating me. Really I fear you find me a most uninteresting husband."

"You are provoking at times, Julie, but on the whole you are a most likable, lovable, loyal man and much too good for me."

"Oh, don't say that," he pleaded generously.

"Kiss me," she commanded.

He kissed her—with a sense of appalling futility in the caress. Then, knowing from past experience that he would get nowhere in an argument initiated by himself, he went to the desk in the next room and wrote her a check for a thousand dollars.

"I'm shooting that little old savings bank account all to pieces," he warned her. "I've ordered at least a thousand dollars worth of clothing for myself——"

"But, Julie, won't that leave us terribly short?"

"Perhaps. I don't care any more. I'm tired of being a miser, tired of being cheaply clad, tired of repression and scheming in pitiful ways to save a dollar. That sort of thing robs a man of his self-respect, so I'm going to try appearing opulent."

"But why did you order your wardrobe without having me with you, darling! You know your taste is atrocious."

"No," he countered gently, "I do not know that. On the contrary, your taste is not agreeable to me; that is, in the matter of my wardrobe."

"Are we going to live in this third-class hotel forever, Julie?"

How adroit she was at changing a topic of conversation once she realized she could not dominate it!

"I imagine we will live here until we can afford to lease a house or an apartment, employ a cook and a maid and buy some decent furniture."

"I loathe this hotel," she complained.

"Well, you can't cook and you loathe housework, and, at least, in this hotel, you are spared both annoyances, Mercy."

Their conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Ben Whitton was on the line.

"Come down to the office," he commanded. "I have a proposition I want to discuss with you."

"A man who has been in a fight always looks a thousand per cent worse the morning after," Julie reminded him, "and my eye has not improved. Also I discovered this morning a couple of bright yellow spots on my face, and I look like the devil, and I don't want to go downtown if it can be avoided. Suppose you run up here and explain your proposition."

"I'll be up directly after luncheon," Whitton replied.

Julie turned to his wife. "Snap out of it now, old lady," he half commanded. "This room looks like the wreck of the Hesperus, and I want you to be looking your best when Ben arrives. I have a particular reason for desiring you to be very nice to Ben, even if it hurts you. The old boy says he has a proposition to discuss with me. Some electrical engineering matter, doubtless, in connection with a civil engineering job that's drifted into the office."

Mercedes was instantly interested. "Possibly an opportunity to earn a fee as a consulting engineer," she suggested. His eyes glowed pleasurably. "It certainly would help a lot just now if a big fish should slip into my net."

"Indeed it would, Julie. I need a lot of new clothes so badly."

"Well, I've just given you a thousand dollars to pay for those you have already bought," he reminded her.

She was bathed, dressed rather prettily and sitting

with her husband in the little drawing-room when Ben Whitton arrived, carrying a large map. He greeted Mercedes with extreme cordiality, spread his map out on a table and fastened the corners down with books and an ash tray.

"Got a nice commission for you, Julie," he announced. "Something that will require about sixty days of your time, and it's in connection with a job that I landed this morning. This is a map of Oregon."

He drew a red crayon pencil from his pocket and placed it at a point on the eastern edge of the map. "This line is the O. R. N. from Salt Lake City to Portland"—and he traced a red line over the route. "These people have decided to build a branch about a hundred miles long northeast into this territory. You will note that I have already blocked out in blue ink the territory in question.

"There's a world of timber in there and, naturally, the railroad, seeking new fields to exploit, has for a long time had in mind the tapping of this entire territory, which is, at present, inaccessible to market. There's a national forest in there, and the Banning people, the Hale-Robinson Timber Company, and the Brander Timber Company have very large holdings in that country. It's stuff they picked up dirt cheap twenty or thirty years ago, but which, owing to its inaccessibility, hasn't appreciated much in value. Nor will it until a railroad builds in there.

"Now, the O. R. N. is the natural outlet for all this timber, when it is manufactured, and I imagine that the pressure of these huge timber interests has been brought to bear on the O. R. N., with the result that

they have decided, if a practicable route can be surveyed—one that will not cost in excess of forty thousand dollars a mile to build—to tackle the proposition. Four years ago I investigated it for the S. P. and reported unfavorably upon the general route they would have to travel, but I'm morally certain that the physical difficulties which confronted the S. P. will not confront the O. R. N."

Julie nodded sagely. This was a matter he could understand. "Did you make a thorough investigation of the collateral freight and probable passenger business that might accrue to the road if it built in?" he queried.

"Not a very thorough one, Julie, but the proposed line would tap half a dozen hamlets and, as you know, once a large lumber-manufacturing enterprise gets under way some fair-sized towns usually grow up around it. I do know that there are billions of fir timber in there, and the Hale-Robinson Timber Company and old man Banning have agreed to put in mills to cut half a million feet daily, provided the O. R. N. will build in. So I'm to survey the route and make other required reports."

"Where do I come in, Ben?"

"When these two huge sawmills are erected they will, if possible, be electrically operated. Electricity will be required for the lighting of the towns that always grow up around such a big plant, and a fair profit might be made by extending the service to more distant communities. I have been requested to secure your service in the matter of locating dam sites and

sites for hydroelectric power plants and preparing estimates of the cost of construction, etc."

"Well, you've come to the right shop for that information, Ben."

Whitton looked up at Mercedes. "Isn't it wonderful," he said, "to think that on the very first day Julie and I are in business together a big, profitable job like this should drift into the office?" He slapped Julie across the back with his huge open hand. "I've been after this man for years to throw in with me. Why, this one job should mean a fee of not less than twenty-five thousand dollars, and the best salary you have ever received in one year was six thousand dollars, Julie!"

Mercedes was enthralled at the prospect. She hugged her husband. "Why not give old Ben a hug too," Julie suggested. "I think he rates one as a partner who produces."

Dutifully Mercedes implanted a light kiss on Ben's cheek, and the latter blushed.

Julie was thoughtful. "Here," he said, "is a splendid example of the manner in which adroit and patient men amass millions. These fellows probably bought this stumpage for as little as fifty cents a thousand feet, board measure—hence their taxes have been nominal and I dare say their fire losses have been inconsiderable. They wait thirty years, and then a railroad builds into it, their stumpage is worth seven dollars and then they proceed to manufacture it and make an additional profit.

"A man with some money, having advance knowledge of these projected plans, could slip into that ter-

ritory, buy up a lot of cheap timber, hold it four or five years and double his money—probably treble it. A man with even a moderate amount of money might gamble by taking long-term options, say a year, because as soon as it became generally known that the O. R. N. was going to build in and tap this timber belt, he could unload his option at a huge profit."

"Well," Whitton reminded him, "even if we had the money to invest, we may not ethically take advantage of the information which comes to us in a professional and confidential manner. You'll accept this job, Julie—of course. I very much desire it."

"Well, as you know, Ben, I had planned to do a little research work down at Stanford University and to make some experiments I've had in mind for a dog's age——"

"Oh, Julie," Mercedes protested. "Your research work and your silly experiments can wait three months, can they not?"

"Of course they can, Mercedes," Whitton assured her. "The equipment he would require for his research work has to be ordered from the East, and it will be not less than sixty days before it can be shipped. Julie, you haven't a leg to stand on. It's your manifest duty to take on this job."

"Very well," Julie answered without enthusiasm, "I'll take it. The resultant profit will help me out on my experiments later."

"We can establish a home and be happy," his wife assured him.

"I'm going to be holed up here for four or five days, Ben," Julie went on. "I wish you'd leave this map

with me. I have an idea this preliminary study will enable me to proceed with the job more intelligently when we get on the ground."

"Certainly. Good idea. We'll have a nice camp, Julie. I have my crew, of course—all fine lads. You'll have to dig up your own crew."

"I know the men I can lay my hands on, Ben."

"There's wonderful hunting and fishing in that country," Ben went on. "We both need a vacation, and on this job we can combine business with pleasure.

Mercedes retired to the bedroom, to reappear a few minutes later arrayed for the street. "I'm going to leave you two together to talk over your business," she announced amiably. "I'll be home for dinner, Julie."

She kissed him affectionately, shook hands with Ben and left.

When she had been gone a minute Ben Whitton said: "I suppose you realize why it is so important for you to take this job, don't you, Julie?"

"It's a damned nuisance, Ben. I really don't want it."

"You numskull! As a firm we have to pay all of our own expenses on this job. It is true we will be reimbursed for them when we submit our bill to the O. R. N., but in the meantime we have to dig up more money than I have in the treasury—and my credit is stretched to the general dimensions of a cobweb. Julie, God certainly had me by the hand when the devil of unrest led you back to this city, with your dreams and your six hundred and fifty thousand dollars to finance this deal, and if you are going to keep from your wife

the secret of Uncle Jarlath's legacy and show an excuse for living on a scale not hitherto possible, it's up to you to take this job. It will allay any suspicions she may have."

When Mercedes Grannis left the apartment she went to the public telephone booth in the lobby and called the Palace Hotel room clerk, from whom she inquired if Mr. Jacob Brander was still registered there.

"He checked out last night and returned to Los Angeles," the clerk informed her, "but Mrs. Brander is still here." She went to another public telephone station and called up Jacob Brander at his Pasadena home.

"Is anybody listening on an extension telephone, Jacob?" she queried.

"No, I'm in the booth, on a direct line. What's up?"

"I have stumbled across some information that may be of considerable interest to you," she continued, and forthwith proceeded to impart to him the details of the commission which the O. R. N. had given Ben Whitton and her husband's share in it. "I heard Whitton mention that the Brander Timber Company had big holdings in that country," she went on, "and when I heard him and Julie discuss the chances for the huge profit which would fall to the moneyed man who could take advantage of this secret information, I decided at once to tell you about it—in strictest confidence, of course."

"Mercedes," he said, "you're a pearl of great price. I hadn't heard even a whisper of this, and I assure you the information is of very great interest and value to me."

"As soon as I find an opportunity to do so I'll copy from the map which Julie has an outline of the territory it is purposed to tap with this extension of O. R. N. and mail it to you."

"Mail it to my club," he suggested "and thank you a thousand times, my dear. That was rather an unfortunate mess we got into yesterday. How has it turned out for you? Are you in bad with your husband? He knows all about it, you know."

"I don't believe it, Jacob. If he does, he hasn't said so to me, although he did forbid me to continue my friendship with you and Mrs. B. I was assured by Whitton that Julie didn't recognize me: didn't know I was with you at the time of the wreck."

"Well, he knows it, all right. He called me up shortly after the wreck and gave me my orders. Told me if he caught me as much as lifting my hat to you hereafter we'd argue the matter in the smoke."

Mercedes was distressed. "He's a queer creature, Jacob. He never tells half of what he knows. I'll never know the moment he'll jump me about it. I'm —I'm terrified."

"Perhaps I should not have mentioned it to you, Mercedes, but I did it to put you on your guard. Be careful."

"Oh, I will. Did you know, too, that your wife knows all about it; that she has had detectives in her employ for some time?"

"Yes, she flew into a rage and told me all about it. We had quite a battle yesterday afternoon, and the upshot of the matter is she has demanded a divorce and a heavy settlement."

Mercedes was almost hysterical. "Is she going to bring my name into it?" she almost screamed.

"Of course not. She had nothing tangible upon which to make an accusation because there is nothing tangible."

"That doesn't make the least difference with a jealous woman. She'll make the charge just the same, merely to spatter me. And if she does I'll die."

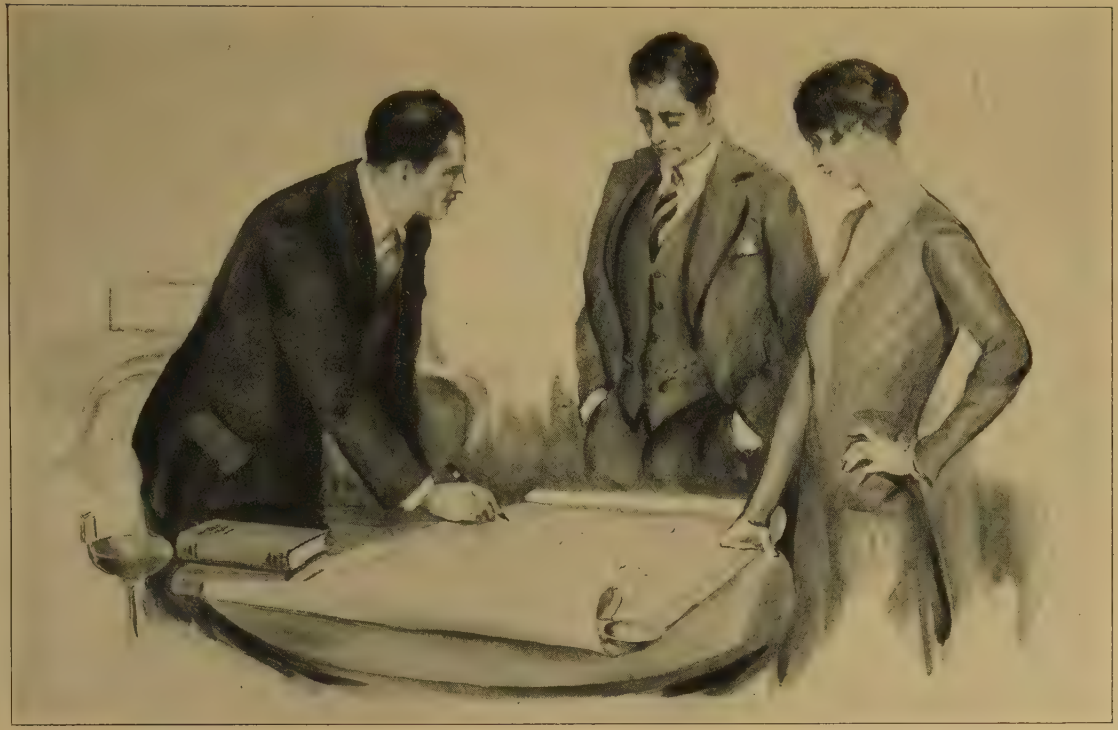
He sighed so deeply she could hear it over the wire. "What do you suppose I offered her a divorce and two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for if it wasn't to keep your name out of it, Mercedes? I couldn't afford it any more than you could—not with that wild husband of yours gunning for me. No, there is no reason for worry.

"As soon as Mrs. B. starts for Paris, I'll come up to San Francisco to talk things over. Write me at the club when Grannis starts for Oregon, and in the meantime keep a stiff upper lip and *don't worry*. This railroad building tip you've given me will get me back the money I'll have to give the missus and then some. And when I make the clean-up I'll not forget you."

"I'm so glad of that, Jacob. I do so want to help, if I can."

"You're a sweetheart, and I'm crazy about you," he replied. "Good-by. And don't forget that map."

She did not forget it, but it was three days before she found an opportunity to get Julie out of the apartment, when she took the map Ben Whitton had left with him and carefully copied on the map she had bought the tracings of the proposed route of the branch line and the approximate timbered area the branch line



"WHY, THIS ONE JOB SHOULD MEAN A FEE OF NOT LESS THAN $25,000," SAID BEN.

was to tap. Then she sent her map, sans comment, to Jacob Brander at his Pasadena club.

Meanwhile the slightly strained relations between her and Julie had disappeared. Once more he was the tolerant, kindly, lovable husband, and in the knowledge of a large fee impending, Mercedes' own spirits took an upward jump.

And Julie was happier than he had been since he married her. With the aid of Ben Whitton's attorney, he had established a trust fund of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of securities, revocable by him at any time, the income to be payable to him during life and at his death the trust to become permanent during Mercedes' life and at her death to be turned over to Gloria Justin. In the event of Gloria's death prior to his wife's, the trust was to be dissolved at his wife's death and the securities paid over to Ben Whitton, for Julie had no legal heirs in whom he was remotely interested. Then he made his will, and in the knowledge that he had done his best by those he loved, he found a happiness that surprised his wife.

In the meanwhile he had leased and furnished an office *en suite* with Ben Whitton's and the entire suite of office doors was relettered. For two weeks he was tremendously busy, looking at buildings suitable for the sort of workshop he had in mind. Finally, on the southern outskirts of the city, he found a two-story rice mill that had been idle since its owners had been ruined in the financial debacle of 1920–21. He was able to lease the land for three years, with an option of five more, and to purchase the old mill very cheaply.

During these busy days he saw little of Gloria Jus-

tin, and it was like him, in the excess of his zeal, to feel no deprivation because of this.

Despite their ancient friendship and the old sentimental association that had once obtained between them, Gloria accepted her responsibilities as secretary as calmly, as naturally, as if she had never seen Julian Grannis before.

"Competent girl, Gloria," Julian told Ben Whitton. "She doesn't have to be told to do obvious things, doesn't have to be watched and checked up."

Nevertheless, for six days in succession she gave evidence of an interest in him not wholly secretarial. One day he appeared at the office arrayed in a new suit, new shirt, tie, socks and shoes to match. When he summoned Gloria to take some dictation, instead of seating herself demurely, she stood in the doorway an appreciable moment and looked him over.

"Stand up, please," she requested. So he stood up, and she walked around him, surveying him critically. "Take that suit back to the tailor, and tell him to lower the collar half an inch," she ordered. "It has a slight tendency to climb. Otherwise I approve very heartily."

"Thank you," he said, beaming.

When he entered the following morning with a different suit Gloria again inspected him, gave a little nod of approval and set to work.

"I have more where that came from," he bragged.

"Then wear one a day until I have seen them all," she urged, and he complied.

"Like 'em?" he queried, on the last day.

"I do. They're in good taste, Mr. Grannis."

"I'm Julie when we're alone," he corrected her, almost belligerently.

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly.

She handed him a number of letters. "Here's one that isn't opened," he declared. "Gloria, I told you to open all my mail. You're my confidential secretary and I have nothing to conceal from you."

"I thought, perhaps, you might prefer that one unopened," she replied.

He glanced at the superscription in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope and noted that it was from the Los Angeles Retail Credit Association and had been forwarded to him from Madrone, Calif. This information meant nothing to him, however, until he read the communication enclosed:

Mr. Julian Grannis,
Madrone, Calif.

DEAR SIR:

This office has had placed with it for collection, sundry accounts, as per list attached, against your wife, for goods furnished Mrs. Grannis by members of this association during the period she occupied the premises at 244 North Ardmore Boulevard, this city. Inasmuch as these accounts are now more than six months old and nothing has been paid upon them, and inasmuch as we have received no response from Mrs. Grannis in reply to our repeated requests that these accounts be adjusted, either wholly or in part, and since it has come to our attention that Mrs. Grannis has vacated her former address in this city, we are venturing to bring the matter to your personal attention in the hope that we may be favored with a check in full by return mail.

Very truly yours, ——.

He reread the communication, then carefully inserted it in his desk. His face, Gloria noticed, was very red, but he said nothing for a long time. Then:

"Take a telegram—day message," he ordered crisply. "Los Angeles Retail Credit Association, Los Angeles, Calif. Replying your communication 5th instant addressed me at Madrone, Calif., and forwarded, please address very stiff telegram to your creditor at Hotel Romaine, this city, threatening suit unless you receive immediate response and also promising, unless accounts settled, to bring matter to my attention Stop Desire party given good fright Stop If check to cover not received by you within week, wire me and I will settle immediately."

When he came home that night he found Mercedes, in a new evening dress, preening herself before her mirror. "I want you to take me out to dinner, Julie, darling," she informed him, as she lifted her head for his kiss. "We'll go to a good show afterwards. I've got the tickets. Do you like my dress?"

"It seems very becoming indeed, Mercy. Cash or credit?"

"Cash."

"That's good. I don't want you to contract any more bills, my dear. They worry me. I suppose you've sent checks for the bills you owe in Los Angeles."

"The day after you gave me the thousand dollars," she replied instantly. "It was such a relief to pay them."

He said nothing, but went into the bedroom to shave, bathe and dress. Her report had comforted him

greatly. Her creditors must have neglected to inform the Retail Credit Association of the receipt of her checks, he decided.

As they were going out to dinner Mercedes suddenly put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I'm so happy, Julie," she breathed.

Something of the old thrill of their earlier married life shot through him. He thought he could understand why she was so happy to-night. The knowledge that she was in the clear on her debts would account for that.

He was so happy he realized that, despite the sudden rush of love or sentiment or passion or whatever one might call it that had assailed him when he met Gloria Justin at Ben Whitton's house, he still loved his wife. The thought came to him that he would always love her if she played the game as she had been playing it the past ten days; he felt within him a swift, resurgent rush of his old allegiance; in the knowledge that, for one night, he had wavered in that allegiance he felt now a corroding shame.

The day he and Ben Whitton and their crews were to leave for Portland Gloria laid a telegram on his desk:

CLIENTS REPORT NO CHECKS RECEIVED SENT HOT WRITE BUT NO RESPONSE PLEASE FORWARD YOUR CHECK AS PER PROMISE

LOS ANGELES RETAIL CREDIT ASSOCIATION

For a long time he stood staring at the telegram, then with a deep sigh, he found the list of creditors in his desk, added the sums due them, and handed the

sheet to Gloria. "Send a check for that amount to these people," he ordered in a choking voice.

He seized his hat and departed for his hotel. Mercedes was practicing on her violin when he came in. He walked up to her and thrust under her nose the first communication he had received in the matter of her unpaid bills. She read it. Next he handed her the carbon copy of his telegraphic reply and she read that. Then he handed her the telegram received that morning.

She hung her head and reflected a moment on the situation in which she had been discovered; then, deciding that the old measures would still avail, she made a sudden dive for him and reached her arms around his neck. "Oh, Julie," she sobbed.

He thrust her rather forcibly from him. "You told me you had sent checks for those bills. I gave you the money to pay them. Why have you not done so? Why did you lie to me, Mercy?"

"I—I—wrote them, telling them I couldn't pay for ninety days. I—I didn't know they'd—take the matter up—with you."

"But you lied to me," he persisted.

"Oh, Julie, please don't say that. I—I didn't know you meant *those* bills, so I—I was frightened. They'd sent me a terrible telegram, and I——"

"Have you any of that money I gave you still in your account?"

"A—a little."

"What have you done with it?"

"I—I paid some other bills. I really didn't know

how much I owed, and I paid the most pressing ones. I was afraid—to tell you—everything."

"I think I understand. Well, I've had to pay them to avoid a suit, because a suit would hurt the new firm's credit. Have you any idea where I got the money?"

"I suppose you got it from Ben."

"The man you do not like—the best friend any man ever had. And now I have to give you some more money to take care of your expenses while I'm away on this Oregon trip."

"Oh, Julie, I'm so sorry. I loathe hurting you."

"You do not. You just don't care a damn." He flung a thousand dollars on the table. "I'm leaving for the north with Ben and our crew to-day," he roared, "and I haven't any time to listen to your vapid and insincere excuses. That money will have to last you until I get back. See to it that it does. I'm going to pack my bags."

He left her weeping with shame and terror while he packed a couple of old duffle bags and a suitcase, and called a bell hop to take them downstairs. He stood in the living room a moment, looking down at her, then, without saying good-by, stalked out of the room.

And she did not attempt to stop him.

CHAPTER VIII

After parting with his wife, Julian Grannis drove to the ferry depot in a taxi with his heavy luggage and checked it on his railroad ticket. His heart was very heavy. What, he asked himself, had induced Mercedes to display such a woeful lack of confidence in him, in his depth of understanding and sympathy? Only in the matter of money which he did not have had he ever been ungenerous with her.

Idealist that he was, he believed that married happiness is predicated on perfect trust and perfect confidence, mutually expressed; hence he had never questioned his wife's goings or comings, nor he had never sought to invade her privacy.

She wasn't playing the game; she wasn't coöperating. Manlike and because he loved her (because she was so beautiful physically he needs must endow her with spiritual beauty, being an extremist in all things), it was a terrific shock to him now to discover that he could no longer trust her. He had always found it rather dreadful to lose faith in people, particularly people he loved, respected or admired. Because he was honorable in all things, tolerant and sympathetic, it was instinct with him to arrogate to others these virtues possessed by himself; when he discovered he had done this without any solid basis for his action, his

sense of balance was shocked, his natural egotism was hurt. It imbued him with a consciousness of error, of failure, and he could not, with patience, contemplate error or failure. Had Mercedes been unfaithful to him, he could have understood that—forgiven it, doubtless—and sought a reason to blame himself for at least a part of the temptation. But when she lied to him, he knew he could blame no one but herself.

Suddenly, as he rode back from the ferry to the office, it occurred to him that again he had permitted his pity for her, his tolerance, his chivalry, his subconscious desire to push unpleasant things away from him, rather than to grapple with them, to lead him into error. The moment he had caught her in the lie he had shrunk from the realization of her weakness, had subconsciously retreated from the prospect of developing his lead further.

This, he decided, was unfair to them both. He had never known his wife to misrepresent anything to him heretofore and, the first flush of his anger and chagrin passing, he yearned to discover additional evidence that would enable him to palliate her offense, afford him grounds for a kindlier understanding of her fault.

He returned to his hotel. He still had two hours to spare before train time. He found Mercedes in her room, lying on the bed, weeping.

"Got to settle this thing fully before I go, Mercy," he said, and touched her head gently. "Buck up now, and let's discuss it calmly and dispassionately. It's occurred to me that I may have judged you too harshly, too hurriedly, and I don't want to feel that way about

it any more than you do. Nevertheless I've got to know your exact financial condition."

"Don't Julie, please don't," she sobbed. "I can't talk about it. It's too horrible—and I'm so ashamed."

"A broken and a contrite heart is a necessary preliminary to reformation," he replied kindly. "I wouldn't be surprised if I could find it in my heart to forgive the first slip. I've never known you to fib to me before, so I realize there must be some very vital reason for your action now. Trust me, Mercy. I'm a fairly understanding sort of idiot. I can't go away leaving you a prey to despair. I've got a hard, technical task to do, and I require a clear, untroubled brain in order to grapple with it successfully. I shall be distressed until I know there is no possibility of a suit being brought against me. Will you permit me to look at your check book in order that I may satisfy myself, from the record on the stubs, just what bills you have paid?"

She shuddered. "You will have to trust me, Julie," she quavered.

He was instantly angry. "My request is a fair one. I have a right to know. My honor is involved in this matter, Mercedes. Produce your check book."

"I—I can't. I've lost it," she quavered.

"When did you send out those checks? The day after I gave you the first thousand dollars?"

She nodded her head but did not look up.

"Well, that's easy. If you did that your checks have all come back through the clearing house and have been paid. They're at your bank now. Give me a written order on your bank for your dead checks and

a statement of your account to date. If your checks are numbered, as they should be, the loss of your check book means nothing."

"I'll not have my private affairs pried into!" she protested.

"But they are my private affairs, too," he reminded her, calmly.

"You must accept my assurance that I do not owe a dollar in the world, Julie."

"I'm sorry but your testimony is susceptible to doubt. I do not wish to harbor doubts in this matter, and until you accede to my request I must continue to harbor them."

"I can't help that. I'll not be spied upon."

He could have groaned at her stupidity, at the futility of his attempts to reach her.

"You kept a secret from me and now I'll do the same," she sobbed. "I'll not be treated as if I were your slave."

For a mad moment he yearned to turn her over his knee and warm her with the flat of his hand. Plainly, what the woman needed was an old-fashioned roughing. He had spoiled her with kindness; each successive yielding to her had weakened his influence over her. She was a problem.

Suddenly he knew her as he had never known her before: knew what was at the bottom of her unhappiness and his. She was selfish—the most monumentally selfish woman God had ever created.

Now, when such knowledge as this comes to an unselfish man, the result is apt to be devastating. In that illuminating moment, hope died in the heart of

Julian Grannis. . . . Well, he had promised to love and cherish her, to cleave unto her and be faithful until death did them part, and he meant to keep that promise. He had the keen sense of his kind, of his sex generally, of the sacredness of a contractual relation.

For him married life hereafter would be fraught with some of the same sense of helplessness and hopelessness that confront a bankrupt who realizes that, although the law provides a pauper's oath to free him of legal responsibility for his debts, nevertheless the debts remain, a burden on his conscience—a burden that will never be lifted until, little by little, through a grim processional of the years, he pays voluntarily one hundred cents on the dollar and rehabilitates his self-respect.

He stood alone in a stricken field. He felt again the old sense of hopelessness, of desolation and helplessness he had once felt, when, leading his company to the assault across a field, he kept looking back and watching the men go down, watching the white, tense faces of those who survived, their gaze fixed on him, waiting for him to go down, knowing that when he did they still must carry on. Yes, he had to carry on, to make the best of a sorry business, to be true to his contract.

He looked down at her, his lips quivering. How helpless she was, how arrogant in her helplessness! She was unfitted to battle with the world, she was unfitted to be a good wife, and, married or single, she could never quite grasp the brimming cup of happiness. It would always be just a little beyond her

reach, for it is ever thus with selfish people. God, he reflected, sends little pestilences upon them. . . .

No, he must go on. He must argue with her in happier moments, little by little drive into her stubborn and not very generous soul a knowledge of her duty as a wife and, if not as a wife, then as a friend. He was sure she loved him, but he was equally sure that such love as hers was not acceptable to him. She had short-changed him. Yes, that was it, short-changed him, and he doubted if she was even aware of the fact. Selfishness dwarfs one's understanding. . . .

"Well, good-by, my dear," he said presently. "I could stand up under your offenses singly, but when they mob me I have to surrender. I'll never trust you again, never wholly believe you. I've been trained to face facts—and you know what a reverence I have for the truth."

His glance rested on her hand bag on the bureau. He stepped swiftly over, opened it and poured out its contents. There were the ten hundred-dollar bills he had given her that morning. But there was more money than that. He counted it. Six hundred and eighty dollars.

He glanced toward Mercy. Her face was still buried in the pillow, and she had not observed his action. So he slipped the thousand dollars back in his pocket and sat down on the bed beside her.

"You paid $250 for that new evening dress, didn't you?" he queried. She nodded.

"And you bought two pairs of shoes and two hats and probably a few other little doodads, didn't you, my dear?"

"Yes, Julie."

"And you spent some money for lunches, theater tickets, a couple of marcels and manicures and gas and oil for your car. Hum-m! Well, that would account for the deficit. Mercy, you have lied to me again. You did not deposit that first thousand dollars I gave you. You never had a check book and you never sent out a single check. Well, while I'm gone move into a single room. You do not require the thousand dollars I gave you a little while ago, so I have taken it back. Your hotel bill will be sent to my office and my secretary will pay it. The hotel cashier will be instructed not to advance you any cash and you will live a quiet, economical existence until my return, when I will put you on a budget."

She bounced up at this. "Why, I never heard of anything so humiliating—" she began, but she was talking to a retreating husband now.

At the hotel desk he left instructions to move Mrs. Grannis into a single room, but a large and sunny one, with bath. To the cashier he gave instructions to refrain from advancing Mrs. Grannis any cash and to send her bill each week to his office for payment. Then the clerk handed him a letter that was in his box and on his way down to the office he read it. It was from Mrs. Jacob Brander, and written from New York.

DEAR MR. GRANNIS:

I think you are too fine a man not to be worth a warning from me. After our conversation that day I went back to the hotel, fully intending to be nice to Jake and never let him know what I knew. But he lied to me and I lost my temper, and the result is we

quarreled, and I am now on my way to Paris to get a divorce. Jake has made an acceptable settlement on condition that I shall not bring your wife's name into a divorce action. Of course I would never have done this anyhow, because after meeting you I realized you were too fine a gentleman to be made to suffer for her foolishness. I know you trust her, and I honor you for it, but, just the same, take a tip from me and keep an eye on Jake Brander. He's on the loose now, and while he's terribly afraid of you, he always was one to take a chance.

Sincerely,
JANE BRANDER.

Arrived at his office, Julie wrote to the hotel a confirmation of his declination to be held responsible for any cash advanced his wife and warned the hotel not to advance her any. He kept a carbon copy of this letter, put the original in an envelope and gave it to Gloria to send by registered mail. After accepting it for mailing, the girl passed through the suite of offices to Ben Whitton's sanctum.

"I think you should go in and see Julie, Ben," she confided. "The world has fallen on him, I think."

Ben obeyed instantly. He found his friend seated at his desk, his arms outspread before him, his face buried in them. Instantly he retreated on velvet feet. Back in his own office he faced Gloria Justin.

"Right-o, Gloria. He caved in after you left him and he thought himself alone. Something has hit him a terrific wallop, but I didn't stay to investigate, and praise be he didn't hear me come in. If it's any business of mine, he'll confide in due course; otherwise he will not."

Ben pondered. "We were going north in the same drawing-room. Kill the drawing-room, Gloria, and try to get us two compartments adjoining. The old boy will be wanting some privacy until he recovers. He's out of control."

"What could have happened to him, Ben? When he gave me some instructions about his mail and his bills he wanted paid, he could scarcely speak. Kept swallowing his Adam's apple. And his face was terrible."

"Julie's been crushed, but crushing is good for him, Gloria. It will squeeze some of the sentiment and idealism out of him—at least where that wife of his is concerned. God help the man that tells him so."

While Gloria was talking to the Pullman company, Julian Grannis came through her office, stood beside her and listened.

"Wild extravagance," he commented. "Whose orders?"

"Mr. Whitton's."

"Kill them. We'll travel in the same stateroom."

He passed on into Ben's office, helped himself to a cigar from Ben's humidor, lighted it and looked at his friend with dead eyes.

"Thank you for your kindly effort to provide me with privacy as we travel north," he murmured, "but I shall not need privacy. In fact, it would be the worst thing in the world for me. So I have told Gloria to disobey your orders."

Ben nodded like a screech owl. He tried bravely to meet his friend's glance, but failed before the tragedy he read there.

"You've done your best for me—and for Mercedes," Julie went on in a dead voice. "I'm afraid she isn't grateful, but I am. I thought you'd like to know that, Butch, because, as a rule, the best one achieves for sticking his finger into the domestic affairs of his friends is about one hundred per cent of the worst of it!"

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea what you're driving at," Ben protested virtuously.

"I have received a letter from Mrs. Jacob Brander, Butch."

"That information conveys nothing to me, old son."

"I think I love you best when you lie, Butch. Read that," and Julie tossed the letter on the desk.

Ben read it and sighed. "This proves you just can't trust a woman," he declared. "They mean well, but they are swayed by their emotions."

"The lady is, evidently, a trifle jealous of her husband's friendship for Mercedes, Ben. You will note that she makes no accusation against Mercedes, however. Not a half-bad sport at that, I take it."

"I noted that, Julie. Her principal grouch is against her husband."

"Of course this letter was intended for you, Butch. I recall that you prevented her from calling upon us at our hotel the afternoon of the day Brander wrecked your car. You talked with her in the lobby instead, and I gather that you represented yourself as Julian Grannis."

"No, I did not. She merely jumped to the conclusion I was you and I didn't undeceive her. Couldn't, you know. It would have spoiled every-

thing. I was fighting for your happiness, my friend —and your wife's also."

"Hum-m! Mercedes was a secondary consideration. Too bad you didn't warn Mrs. Brander not to communicate with Mercedes' husband, no matter what the provocation. If you had done that, I would not have received this letter."

"I meant well, Julie." Ben was miserable.

"I know you did. I knew you meant well the day Mrs. Brander called, and I wondered that day why you were so ambitious to do well by me, but now I've figured it out. Mercedes was in the car with Brander that day. I couldn't see her because the blood was running into my eyes, but you saw her. That's why you sent me into action against Brander. You wanted to afford Mercedes an opportunity, while I was thrashing Brander, to escape. Pretended you were hurt badly; you knew the thought that you were badly hurt would set me afire—and it did.

"It is apparent to me now that Mrs. Brander knew all about the incident and called on us to do a little plain and lofty hell-raising with Mercedes. But you blocked that, too. However, this thought occurs to me, Ben. How did Mrs. Brander know? Her husband would not be likely to tell her, so she must have been trailing him herself—no, she wouldn't do that. She would employ detectives. She could afford them, you know."

A comforting thought now ironed out the agony in Julie's face. "Evidently her detectives were unable to report anything reprehensible. If they had, she would have moved into action without warning,

and the fact that she called to warn Mercedes against any further friendship with her husband proves this."

"I might as well tell you, Julie, that I have discussed this matter with Mercedes and am convinced that she has committed no fault in excess of indiscretion. She has had her lesson, I think."

Julian addressed an envelope to his wife, slipped Mrs. Brander's letter (still in its envelope) into it, licked it with gusto and pounded it vigorously.

For a fleeting instant, Ben Whitton was tempted to tear the envelope from Julie's hands, to destroy it, to forbid him to mail it. He opened his mouth to protest, to advise that nothing good could come of his friend's action; that it would be the part of diplomacy for Julie to forget the incident and never mention it; that there was merit in permitting sleeping dogs to lie. But at that instant Gloria Justin entered the office.

"If you two intend to catch your train, you had better start now," she warned. Then Ben Whitton saw her fine, intelligent eyes rove over his friend and noted the look of relief that shone for an instant in them as she observed that Julie was no longer crushed and white faced. She flashed Ben a grateful glance, and on the instant he resolved to stifle his protest.

Who was he to protect Mercedes Grannis in this moment of her husband's disillusionment? Did he not know her for a heartless fool, and had not his experience of life taught him that there is a fool killer for every fool? Already he had obligated her to him, and for that she hated him. Because he knew her secret she would always hate him.

Julie rose and went into his own office for his hand bag, leaving the girl and Ben Whitton alone.

"You've bucked him up wonderfully, Ben," Gloria whispered, "but do it some more. He needs you so."

"It is my invariable policy," Mr. Whitton replied enigmatically, "to arrogate to every man the right to kill his own snakes. Be good and you will be lonely; all that glitters is mica or brass filings and a stump-tailed yellow pup is the best for coons. You have our train number and the number of our drawing-room. Wire me if anything important turns up and look after things while I'm away. Now shake hands with your jackass of a boss. When the golden sun is sinking and you of toil are free, and of loved ones you are thinking, will you sometimes think of me?"

Gloria took his proffered hand. "I always think of you, Ben. You're the finest friend any woman could ever have. So fine, indeed, that sometimes I grow embarrassed to think I am on your pay roll."

"Hum-m! Just about the time you're beginning to be really useful to me, you'll be quitting to get married, Gloria. Well, adios. Duty calls."

Julie came in, said good-by to her in a most matter-of-fact manner and he and Ben departed. Gloria stood in the office entrance and watched them disappear in the elevator. "What a curiously assorted pair," she reflected. "Both quite disturbed about something and both thinking they can conceal it from me and from each other. Well, whatever it is, Mercedes Grannis is at the bottom of it."

Selfish people quite usually make a swift recovery from the grief and humiliation they have brought

upon themselves. Doubtless this is due to the fact that such people are the possessors of an enormous ego, which leaves little room in their cosmos for a sense of shame. Mercedes wept for half an hour after her husband left her. Then, deciding that there was no further necessity for tears, since Julie was not present to be submerged in them and brought to a realization of his hardness of heart, she bathed her eyes, powdered her nose and sat down by the window to think things over.

She was very angry at her husband. What a Paul Pry he was and how weary she was of his constantly reiterated sermons, his assumption of a superior virtue. She wondered how much longer she could put up with his nagging. She admitted, in a sudden access of martyrdom, that, after all, she was more to blame for their unhappiness than he, because she should never have married him.

Of course, she had loved him at the time, albeit her love had been tempered by the knowledge that in marriage lay a measure of safety she might not, as a single woman, be at all certain of achieving. But love without sufficient money to support it, she realized now, was at best an unstable thing. The constant necessity for husbanding a slender store, the unending penury and the humiliations it entailed, plus the knowledge that in marriage she had sacrificed the musical career she felt she would, by now, have achieved, had forced love to yield to regret, to irritation and unhappiness.

She told herself that Julie no longer bore her the old ardent, passionate love of the first year of their

married life. Love, with him, had to be content with second place. His profession, his career, his ambitions, rose superior to hers, overtopped every other consideration. They were settling into a rut and no good could possibly come of it; she was realizing at last that nothing she could do pleased him. He was ultracritical, inquisitive, domineering—and all in such a polite, patient, gentlemanly manner she found it most aggravating to reply to him in kind. He was "nasty nice." Yes, that was it. Perhaps he didn't mean to be, but then could one afford to dally with suppositions in a world where facts alone counted? Facts were all that counted with him. He was unsympathetic, he lacked understanding of her woman's soul, he talked money, money, money until the slightest reference to it made her shudder.

Well, apparently, he was now in a fair way of making much more money in partnership with Ben Whitton than he had ever dreamed of making. But what of that? Could money heal the breach that had opened between them? Mercedes doubted this. Of course she had, for reasons best known to herself, deceived him in the matter of those bills, and with the readiness of her kind she forgave herself this but refused to forgive him for discovering her deception. He had committed the unforgivable crime of making her appear small in her own eyes.

She considered the matter of a divorce. Of what use to go on with this farce known as married life—with Julie? They could never possibly understand each other, so why try? Of course, she reflected, Julie had a horror of divorce. She remembered that they

had discussed the subject frequently in relation to other people and Julie had always declared that, nine times out of ten, divorce was a sign of weakness, of a lack of courage and intelligent coöperation.

To his way of thinking, it predicated a battle of wills, the strange, baffling, perverse ambitions of the wife to achieve absolute submission on the part of the husband. Man, Julie claimed, was not born to submit to woman. He was the natural and inevitable leader, the senior member of the partnership. His leadership might not be of the highest order, but if it was fair and moral and the best he could achieve, he was entitled to coöperation—passive coöperation at least. If women, helpless in the face of new and constantly shifting economic forces, looked to their husbands to protect them, to support them and cherish them, they should be willing to help them, to accord them a reasonably free hand in what was, at the best, no easy task.

Well, there was much to be said on both sides of that argument, and no amount of argument had ever decided the issue.

Mercedes next considered the advantage that might accrue to her if she divorced Julie. In the matter of alimony she would be worse off, financially, than she had ever been since she married him. The best she could hope for was two hundred and fifty dollars a month—and an unsympathetic judge might award her less. She had no sound grounds for a complaint in a divorce action, and if she filed one Julie might be perverse enough to fight it. Such fights were always expensive, and Mercedes could not contemplate with

equanimity sharing Julie's assets with a couple of attorneys.

She decided, therefore, that her best plan for the present was to withhold action until Julie had collected his fee from the railroad people. Under the community property law of California she would be entitled, in the event of a divorce, to one half of that fee: twelve thousand five hundred dollars—well, say ten thousand, after deducting his expenses. That would be better than alimony paid indefinitely. Ten thousand dollars would, with reasonable care, last her two years, and in two years many things can happen—she might marry again, a man more in sympathy with her, a man not perennially agitated by thoughts of money or power or fame, a man not so disgustingly bent (like Julie) on doing something for humankind. Julie's prating of cheap electricity to lighten the burdens of mankind had always irritated her. What was the world at large to him? she wondered. She was his sole consideration, and she meant to have it so or know the reason why.

An hour later a bell hop came up to her apartment with a special delivery letter. As she glanced at the envelope and noted from the return address in the upper left-hand corner that it had come from Ben Whitton's office, she smiled. Yes, the address was in Julie's neat, firm, precise chirography—so suggestive of the man himself.

"He's sorry already," she thought. "Why will he persist in quarreling with me one minute and taking me to his heart the next? He's so spineless."

She opened the envelope and found the other en-

velope within; she read Mrs. Jacob Brander's letter to her husband, and was numb with terror.

"He knows!" she whispered soundlessly. "He has known it all along. That odious Whitton has betrayed me. Oh, what shall I do? What if Julie sues *me* for a divorce?"

She commenced to weep, very violently, and they were not crocodile tears now. By degrees, however, she gathered her wits and commenced her usually cool consideration of this new predicament in which she found herself. And while she was revolving the matter in her mind, the telephone rang and she answered it.

"Mercedes?" Mr. Jacob Brander was speaking. "Just got into town."

"Oh, Jacob, I'm so glad you've called up. I'm in *such* trouble."

"Are you alone?" Mr. Brander was cautious.

"Yes. Julie left this morning for Oregon."

"Three cheers! Suppose you come to luncheon with me, and we'll talk it over."

"Are you certain——"

"Absolutely. Jane is in the middle of the Atlantic, bound for Paris to secure a divorce. I've already settled with her, and she's called off the dogs. How about a little bite of luncheon? My car has been repaired. We'll drive out to that little restaurant at the beach. How soon shall I call for you?"

"In fifteen minutes," she answered eagerly. "Oh, Jake, you're a dear to risk calling me up."

"Faint heart never won fair lady," he replied gallantly. "Meet me in front of the hotel in fifteen minutes."

She was waiting for him when he drove up; being a discreet man, he was driving the car himself. Mercedes got in beside him, and he reached over and gave her hand a comradely little squeeze; he laughed as he noted her quick scrutiny of his fat, good-natured countenance.

"Cæsar is himself again," he declared. "That husband of yours gave me quite a shellacking, confound him, but the last mark of conflict disappeared two days ago, otherwise I would not have had the courage to confront you. Quite a handy man, Grannis, I'll say that for him."

"I was so sorry, Jacob, but, then, Julie's terribly quick-tempered, and he was quite the best boxer in his class at college. He would never have attacked you, however, if that horrible Ben Whitton hadn't asked him to. That man seems to have a strange power over Julie. I have been unable to break it."

"Oh, come, come, don't be too hard on Whitton. He must have seen you and recognized you and, insofar as I know, he hasn't peached on us. Jane had detectives on my trail." He chuckled. "Smart girl, Jane. I knew she was suspicious, and I should have acted accordingly. Well, no use crying over spilt milk, Mercedes. You're looking as lovely as usual."

She assured him her looks belied her real feelings and was in turn assured that they would talk that matter over at luncheon. And when they found themselves seated in a remote corner of a semi-deserted beach café, he reminded her of the promise by querying:

"Well, Mercedes, my dear, what's run up your back?"

She took his wife's letter to Julie from her hand bag and handed it to him.

"I don't see anything in this to worry about," he declared. "I told you your husband knew you were with me that day, even if he did not mention the matter to me."

"You were wrong. He did *not* know."

"How come?"

"Mrs. Brander called at the hotel to see me, following the accident. When she telephoned up from the desk, Ben Whitton went down and passed himself off as my husband. He managed to soothe her ruffled feelings. I know this because he came back and told me all about it."

"What a nice, neighborly chap Mr. Whitton is! I wonder if he's the chap that telephoned me to keep off the grass in the future or take the risk of a ride to the morgue?"

"When did you receive this warning?"

"About two hours after the crash."

"Then Ben Whitton telephoned you . . . Julie was up in the apartment with me until nearly four o'clock and if he had telephoned I would have known it."

Mr. Brander's round, rubicund face was a mask of seriousness. "Hum-m! Not so good, eh?" He glanced at the postmarks of the envelope. "Grannis received this at the hotel this morning. That was the first news he had of it, so he hastened to send the information to you. Rather a gentle hint, I take it, to mind your step. Now, I wonder if *he's* engaged a flock of detectives."

Mercedes shook her head. "He wouldn't—and he

couldn't. He can't afford it. No, I'm sure he wouldn't. He would regard spying upon me as dishonorable. Really, he's not a bit jealous. That's one virtue he has that I've always adored."

"Well, thank God for that. You two been quarreling lately?"

"Oh, yes," she sighed wearily. "He's very difficult, Jacob. I can't seem to please him, no matter how hard I try." And Mercedes wiped a small tear from the corner of her right eye.

Brander reached over and patted her other hand. "There, there," he soothed. "This married life isn't all beer and skittles, Mercedes. I ought to know," he added virtuously. A pause. Then: "Well, what are you going to do about it, Mercedes?"

"I—I don't know, Jacob. I'm horribly unhappy."

Mr. Brander looked horribly unhappy himself. Evidently this information had wounded him cruelly. "I wish," he murmured, "that it was my job to look after your happiness."

"Oh, Jacob, you mustn't," she protested, but not too forcibly. Her heart was beating wildly.

He was instantly encouraged. "Oh, but I do wish it, dear. From the moment I met you I have wished it. Yes, I know that's not in the book, but I'm a human being and I can't help wishing my—ah—wishes. I have realized for a long time that you were unhappy. Why don't you ask him to give you a divorce? I daresay he wouldn't mind."

"But he loves me so, Jacob. I just couldn't be cruel to him."

"Oh, you couldn't," he retorted with a slight sneer.

"If I divorced him what would I do?" she queried plaintively.

He leaned across the table and took possession of both her hands. "Listen, Mercedes," he pleaded, "I know very well I shouldn't say what I'm going to say, because we're both married—still—but nevertheless I'm going to say it. I love you, Mercedes. You wouldn't have to worry if, after divorcing Grannis—and after Jane has cut loose from me in Paris—you married me. How about it, Mercedes?"

"Oh, Jake, dear," she breathed. "I don't know what to think."

This reply, indicating as it did to Brander that she had already made up her mind and, womanlike, was merely appearing reluctant to yield too quickly, emboldened him.

"Tell me you'll marry me if and when you can," he begged. "I can't live without you, Mercedes. I'm mad about you. You know I'd appreciate you. We could go to Europe, and I'd have the greatest masters of the violin give you lessons. I could boost you along, help you to make for yourself the career you've been denied because you married a poor man. Let me hope, Mercedes."

She looked across at him with sad resignation. "Oh, Jacob, I don't know. I think a very great deal of you—too much, I often fear——"

"Darling," he almost blubbered. He was much affected, his head being as soft as his heart. But almost instantly he was all business. "Tell you what you do," he went on. "You go up to Reno, rent an apartment there for three months and file your notice of

residence with the district court there. The new Nevada law requires but three months' residence in the state to entitle one to file a divorce action.

"After arrival in Reno, write Grannis—a nice, long, friendly letter, telling him exactly how you feel about this thing and asking him not to oppose the suit. . . . The chances are that he will not. The average man declines to oppose his wife's suit for divorce. He feels that if she doesn't want to live with him he'd be a sucker to force her to.

"You can engage a lawyer and claim neglect and mental cruelty: he'll let the suit go by default and—well, he'd have to go to Nevada to be served with the complaint in action. But I daresay he'll be decent and do that. You'll need some money, of course. Well, don't worry about that. Meanwhile I'll be in Paris. Got to go there to fix up the deal with Jane. I'll be free before you are, and the minute you cable me that your decree has been granted, I'll come home and we can be married. Then—Europe—life—joy—happiness!"

He beamed across the table at her. "Is it a go, Mercedes?"

She cast down her eyes becomingly. "It's a terrible thing to contemplate, but—oh, Jacob, are you quite sure you truly love me?"

"I adore you," he assured her.

She smiled wanly and reached a hand across to him. He bent and kissed it—and from the other end of the café the orchestra struck up a popular tune. Brander's thick fingers tapped the table as he kept time to the music, humming:

"I want to be happy,
But I can't be happy,
Until I make you happy, to-o-o!"

"You're such a great big boy," Mercedes expostulated charitably. "Just a great big boy."

CHAPTER IX

In conformity with the plan concocted with Jacob Brander, Mercedes Grannis acted with promptness. The day following her interview with Brander, she gave up her apartment at the hotel and went to Reno, where she engaged a small housekeeping apartment for three months. As soon as she was settled she called upon a prominent firm of attorneys, told them what she wanted, and made her deal with them. Then, after filing notice of her residence, she settled down to the unpleasant task of marking time for three months, the statutory residential requirement, preliminary to filing her suit for divorce against Julie.

The morning after Mercedes' departure from San Francisco, Gloria Justin found in Julian Grannis' mail at the office the closing bill from the hotel. She checked it, noticing an item of $11.77 for transportation.

"I wonder where she has gone," Gloria thought. "That much transportation should carry her at least a hundred miles. Apparently she has not returned to Los Angeles."

Because she had a modicum of feminine curiosity, Gloria telephoned the hotel and asked for Mrs. Grannis, and was informed by the clerk that she had checked out the day previous. To Gloria's inquiry for information as to her new address, the clerk, after a brief wait,

"SKOAL!" BEN SAID, AND HE AND HIS FRIEND DRANK THE SWEDISH HEALTH.

replied that she had left as a forwarding address, "General Delivery, Reno, Nevada."

Gloria pondered this information. General Delivery, Reno, Nevada! Why had Mercedes gone there? A musical engagement, perhaps. Evidently she intended remaining there some time, otherwise she would not have left General Delivery as a forwarding address. Rather would she have left the address of a hotel, or that of a friend if she contemplated visiting a friend. Apparently she had no idea where she was going to live.

Instantly Gloria's alert brain solved the mystery. "She's going to engage an apartment. She's going to remain there while Julie is away. Is it possible they are going to have a divorce?"

She recalled the white and haggard face Julie had shown on his last day in the office. She had known then that some tragedy of unusual proportions had overwhelmed him; nevertheless, at leaving, he appeared to have recovered his composure to a remarkable degree. Gloria wondered if he knew!

"No," she decided presently, "he did not. Had he known, he would not have left the city. He loves her. He would not give her up without a struggle."

She looked over the schedule of her employers' movements which Whitton had given her. From this she ascertained that they would remain four days in Portland, outfitting for their trip into the wilds of the Columbia River basin; so, without an instant's hesitation, she called their hotel.

Ben Whitton answered. "This is Gloria speaking, Ben, but don't mention my name if Julie is in the room

with you. I think you ought to know something, but I leave it to your own judgment as to whether you should or should not tell Julie. The day after he left with you, his wife checked out of her hotel and went to Reno. Her address there is General Delivery. So I gather that she will remain there some time and will, in all probability, send the hotel here a more definite forwarding address after she has leased an apartment. Do you think she has gone up there to establish a residence, and then sue Julie for a divorce?"

"I do."

"Does Julie know anything about this?"

"If so, I am not aware of it."

"Is he cheerful?"

"Reasonably so. Whatever the trouble is, I do not regard it, nor does our client, as anything extraordinary, anything that cannot be overcome. Is our man in town?"

She knew he was referring to Jacob Brander.

"I don't know, Ben."

"Better call up the hotel; and if he is still there, wire me and I'll take the matter up direct. Thanks. Good-by!"

An hour later Whitton received a telegram, reading as follows:

BRANDER REGISTERED AT PALACE YESTERDAY STILL THERE GLORIA

This telegram Mr. Whitton carefully tore into little bits and dropped them in the wastebasket. At a desk in the corner Julie was writing a letter—to his wife, Ben inferred. "Probably telling her he's been a brute

and asking her to forgive him for being a man," he soliloquized. Then he went downstairs and at the news stand in the lobby purchased a copy of the *West Coast Lumberman*. He searched through the advertisements in this trade journal, and when he had found what he wanted he called upon an advertiser who had a local office. The sign on this man's door read:

DAVID DEVER
Timber Broker

Into David Dever's chair reserved for visitors Ben Whitton settled his big bulk. "You will, I trust, pardon me for not introducing myself," he began. "I have a reason for remaining incognito for the present, and hence desire to work through a broker. I saw your advertisement in a trade journal, and have called to enlist your services in getting together a very large area of timber land and conducting the negotiations for its purchase. The deal may not amount to anything, but, on the other hand, it may; and if it should, five per cent commission on quite a few millions of dollars is worth working for."

David Dever nodded, and waited for his visitor to elucidate.

"Know the Brander Timber Company, Mr. Dever?"

Dever smiled. "Who doesn't? That company has liquidated to a considerable extent during the past ten years, however, and is now a holding company rather than an operating company."

"Know anything about its holdings in the upper part of the Columbia River basin?"

Dever drew a huge township map down from a case

of maps, and indicated the Brander Timber Company's holdings, which had been blocked off in red ink. "So far as I know," said Dever, "a very representative body of fir timber, with perhaps fifteen per cent red cedar and ten per cent hemlock and larch; the remainder is Douglas fir. I understand it has been on the market for years."

"Wire Jacob Brander and ask him what he wants for it. He is at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco to-day."

Dever called in his secretary and dictated the telegram. "Seller pays the commission, of course," he reminded Whitton.

The latter nodded. "Next line up the Hale-Robinson Company and the Banning people, who have large holdings in the same country. I'll be back in three days. Remember, speed is very necessary."

And Mr. Whitton disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared. At the public telephone booth in the lobby of his hotel he called up Gloria Justin.

"Engage an efficient private detective to shadow Jacob Brander," he ordered. "I've been trying to coördinate a few things which seem unrelated, but which may not be, after all. I have a great curiosity to know whether Brander boards a train for Portland this evening. Have the detective report to you by telephone at your home, and if he reports that Brander has boarded the train for Portland or Reno, let me know. If he heads south, pay off the 'dick' and forget it, but wire me the gist of the latter's report to you. Also have the same detective agency wire its Reno representative to locate Mercedes and let us know what

she's up to. I don't exactly know what I'm going to do to that man Brander, but of this much I'm certain: he'd better play his hand mighty carefully or it'll cost him a lot of money."

Ben's mind was working fast. Having given Gloria her instructions, he went to the writing room and addressed a letter to Mercedes Grannis at the hotel she and Julie had occupied in San Francisco. "The hotel will forward it," he decided. "Mustn't let her know I know she's in Reno and suspect her reason for being there. Cat! She's going to sneak up on Julie's blind side if she can." He wrote:

My dear Mercedes:

I have a feeling that you and Julie had a very serious quarrel just before he left to come to Oregon with me. He is so depressed that I cannot help suspecting that you have threatened to sue him for a divorce.

As his oldest and dearest friend, I am, of course, profoundly interested in his professional success, because it affects my own. Julie is now on his first really big commission as a consulting electrical engineer, and it lies within your power to help him in this task or ruin him. If you should sue him now, if you should even threaten to and he should become convinced that you intended to make good on your threat, I feel that the shock would make it impossible for him to carry on with this very important mission he has undertaken.

You know I do not like you. I know you do not like me. But that is an unimportant detail. It would tickle me to death to see you divorce Julie—a little later; because I think that as a wife to a man of his temperament you have been a very complete washout. Therefore I make you this proposal.

He is writing you to-day, I think. If you can

reasonably do so, answer his letter in a kindly and affectionate strain. It will be rather difficult to get mail in to us where we are going, but a letter a week will keep Julie cheered up and on his toes. If you should leave the city for any length of time (Julie thinks you will not, for reasons best known to himself), it would worry him. He expects you to remain where he parked you. I imagine, however, that you may visit Los Angeles, where you have many more friends than in San Francisco. If you do, please address your letters to him to our office, and my secretary will forward them to him as soon as I can inform her of our post office address, which is, at present, unknown to us. Do not, however, post letters to him from any place out of the city. Enclose them in a large envelope addressed to my secretary, Miss Gloria Justin, and she will mail them. Thus the letters will bear the San Francisco postmark.

If you have to wire him at any time, send your wire to Miss Justin and ask her to forward it for you. I will give her complete instructions.

If you do this for me, Julie will be enabled to complete his report here. He requires a head on this job; he must not have his mental clarity obscured by domestic worries.

Now, if you coöperate and keep him in a cheerful mood, I promise not to make the slightest move to block your plans if you decide, following his return, to sue him for a divorce. If, on the other hand, you refuse or neglect to coöperate with me, I will employ all of my considerable influence with your husband to induce him to fight the case to a finish; to enter a cross-complaint, naming a corespondent but requesting that the decree be denied, and that you be granted separate maintenance, which will be considerably less, in that case, than you would be awarded in alimony if you should secure the decree. And it will be impossible for you to get a decree if he fights the case, because

he is absolutely the finest, most decent, most faithful and blameless man in the world; and you haven't got an iota of evidence upon which to base a divorce action.

In all probability my suspicions at this time are groundless, and but I know very well that you and Julie are drifting apart, and that in the end a divorce is inevitable. He knows now that you were with Mr. Whoozis in the park that day, and I assure you I did not tell him. On the contrary, I have tried zealously to protect him from the receipt of any information or gossip that would make him unhappy.

I think you know I'll keep a promise, and I trust you will be guided accordingly.

Sincerely,

Ben F. Whitton.

P.S. The F stands for Fido.

This letter Mr. Whitton sent south by air mail, and then, feeling very much satisfied with himself—inclined, indeed, to feel that intrigue was his natural *métier*—he ascended to the suite where Julie awaited him. From his bag he took a quart of very good Scotch and mixed two highballs.

"Skoal!" Ben said, and he and his friend drank the Swedish health.

Julie grinned a bit painfully. "Here's to the wide open spaces, old pal, where men are men."

Ben Whitton mailed his letter to Mercedes Grannis on Saturday afternoon. The hotel in San Francisco promptly readdressed it to her, and Mercedes received it on Monday afternoon.

Had the terrible Whitton been present to see her as she perused it, he would have felt amply compensated for all the worry she had caused him. She was furious; but, since she was a total stranger in Reno, her

fury remained bottled within her until she reached her apartment, when she relieved herself in tears.

"That odious Ben Whitton!" she soliloquized. "He spoils everything. He knows his power—damn him! I'll simply have to do as he commands."

However, before committing herself irrevocably to Whitton's program, she found relief in discussing his letter fully with Jacob Brander, who, after the fashion of the love struck, called her up on the long-distance telephone that night just before retiring, alleging the sweet excuse that he knew he couldn't sleep until he had wished her good night.

"I think you had better obey this stout fellow, Mercedes," he advised. "I'm inclined to regard him as a dangerous man to monkey with."

"As you say, dear."

"Nobody knows where you are, and nobody need know except Whitton's secretary, who will, of course, receive your letters addressed to Grannis and note the postmark. But she will not betray you. She's taking orders from Whitton, even if Grannis is one of her chiefs. So you're quite safe to continue where you are and establish your legal residence. It will be time enough to spring the bad news on Grannis when he returns from Oregon; and when you do you'll have Whitton's moral support."

"Yes, I think so, too, Jacob. It would please him to see me out of Julie's life, and the sooner the better. I believe he'll keep his promises."

"He's really a very powerful ally, Mercedes—very powerful. We need him on our side, so see to it that you retain him."

"When am I going to see you?" Mercedes queried. "It's so lonely up here in a strange city where one doesn't know a soul."

"I have a hunch," the man replied, "that I'd better keep away from you, Mercedes."

"Well, you can see me once, can you not? What's to prevent it?"

He pondered. "Well, I'm going to Portland, Ore., to-morrow night. But I can go to Reno instead. I'll be there for breakfast, spend the day with you, catch the Overland again that night for Salt Lake City, and make the O. R. N. over to Portland."

"Oh, that will be wonderful, Jake!"

"By the way," he continued, "that tip you gave me about the railroad activity in the upper Columbia River basin looks more and more like stable information. I've had a wire from a man in Portland, asking me for a price on the Brander Timber Company's holdings. Evidently the news has leaked out in other quarters. I must get on the job promptly if I'm to clean up a fat wedding gift for you and expense money for our honeymoon. See you Wednesday morning, old dear. Good night!"

Late Tuesday night the operative Gloria Justin had engaged at Ben Whitton's order reported to her by telephone:

"Your man checked out of the hotel to-night. I followed him to the ferry and was behind him when he presented his ticket to the ticket chopper at the turnstile. He's gone to Portland, via Salt Lake City, with a stop-over of one day at Reno. I heard him discuss

the trip with the ticket chopper in order to make certain of his connections, and I saw the ticket."

"Have him picked up at Reno and followed until he leaves," she answered. "Get the name and address of everybody he talks with or visits while in Reno, and report for further orders."

Immediately Gloria telephoned to the telegraph company a night letter to Ben Whitton, informing him of Jacob Brander's projected movements and of her action in arranging to have him shadowed in Reno. At the office next morning she found his laconic reply:

YOU ARE A GOOD GIRL GET MY CAR FROM THE GARAGE AND TAKE YOUR MOTHER FOR A WEEK END SOMEWHERE CHARGING MY EXPENSE B F W

On Wednesday morning, Ben Whitton called again at the office of the timber broker David Dever.

"Well," he queried, "any news from the Brander Timber Company?"

"That timber is not for sale."

"Still, I am not without hope," Whitton replied. "Brander is coming to Portland this week and may pay you a visit."

"Well, when he does, I'll work on him."

"In all probability I shall be absent from this city for a month, and it will be impossible for you to communicate with me," Whitton resumed. "However, that timber will keep. It isn't going to be sold in a hurry, and a little waiting on me may have a sound moral effect on the owners. What have you learned regarding that other timber?"

"The Hale-Robinson people have offered theirs at a

dollar and fifty cents a thousand. The Banning crowd wants two dollars, but will listen to an offer."

"I'll let them stew awhile."

As profound a mystery as he had been the day he first called, Whitton then left Dever, and an hour later he and Julie and their party, equipment and supplies were aboard a train bound up-country to the task that awaited them.

Mr. Jacob Brander, like so many of the sons of self-made multimillionaires, had inherited his father's ego and selfishness, but not that quality which had brought the old man from zero to five millions—a quality often referred to by golfers as "the follow through."

He preferred investments that did not have to be watched, which yielded fewer dividends but guaranteed them. Nevertheless, there was in him a strong streak of the gambler. His ego required pampering; as the son of a multimillionaire he believed that he could not, with dignity, quit this world without having added materially to the store he had inherited. He was fond of confiding to his intimates that he owed that to the old man.

Naturally, his intimates had taken advantage of this information to induce him to invest in operations of a highly speculative nature; and many of these had not turned out a whit better than his three marriages, all of which had been very expensive indeed. For the last three years, therefore, he had been curbing his natural bent for demonstrating his shrewdness in business until, with the information furnished him by Mercedes Grannis anent the projected extension of the

O. R. N. railroad into a district where the Brander Timber Company still held a big acreage of fir timber, he saw a splendid opportunity to recoup, in a year or two, all his previous losses; to emerge, probably, with a profit over and above those losses.

The idea captivated him, but since a burned child dreads the fire he moved cautiously. That timber, far out toward the head of the Columbia River basin, had been the one bad investment of the senior Brander's career as a lumberman, although, to do him justice, he had never regarded it as such.

He had purchased it because it was very cheap, and he knew he could afford to hold it indefinitely on the even chance that one day it would become accessible and consequently valuable. Also, he realized it would be one asset his son could not dispose of very readily; if the worst should ever come to the worst, the boy would have this one asset unencumbered, since it was not one any bank would care to loan money on. He assumed that this tract could not remain inaccessible more than thirty years, and that, when it did become accessible, it would be worth more to the Brander dynasty than the appraised value of the old man's total estate.

While Jacob Brander, Junior, was studying the maps of other large holdings contiguous to those of the Brander Timber Company (of which he was the sole owner), he studied also the reports of the stumpage, made by his father's trusted cruisers twenty years previous.

He pondered. Some five years before the Hale-Robinson people had approached him with an offer of

their smaller acreage of timber equally good, and the price they asked then had been a dollar a thousand. It had cost them twenty-five cents, but what with taxes, fire losses and interest on the investment, a dollar would get them out even, and they were willing to sell to him on very favorable terms. Brander wondered now if they were still minded to sell, and he decided to write them.

Before he could do so, however, he received a communication which interested him mightily. A Portland, Ore., timber broker wired, asking if the holdings of the Brander Timber Company in the upper Columbia River basin were for sale, and requesting a price, subject to the customary five per cent commission in the event of a sale. The broker added that he had high hopes of effecting such a sale, provided Mr. Brander was willing to part with the property and provided, of course, the price quoted should not be prohibitive—not more than a dollar and a quarter per thousand, which the broker regarded as rather steep in view of the inaccessibility of the timber.

"I smell a rat," Jacob Brander murmured. "Mercedes' information came direct, and this appears to confirm it. There *is* something doing in that country. Hum-m-m! Since the day Dad bought that timber we have never had an offer on it, and I know the Banning and Hale-Robinson people are still hanging on to theirs. I'll have to go to Portland, see old man Robinson and nose around generally."

Immediately upon his arrival in Portland, he called at the Hale-Robinson office. Robinson, the surviving partner, a man now well past three-score and ten, re-

ceived him with an alert interest which was not lost on his visitor. Following the interchange of commonplaces, Brander referred to the letter Robinson had written him some years before, and ventured to inquire if the Hale-Robinson timber in the upper Columbia River basin was still for sale.

"Anything we have is for sale—at a price!" the shrewd old man assured him. Privately he thought: "Is this fellow here to trade with me? I must be careful. Second feeler I've had in a week. Must be something doing in that country."

"I'm willing to buy it if your old price and the old terms still hold."

"Sorry. The price has gone up, and the terms are stiffer. Lots of inquiry for timber in that country now. Fellow sent a broker to me last week with an offer, and I'm expecting him back with a counter proposition right soon. No, my son. The price of the Hale-Robinson timber to-day is two dollars a thousand, and the terms are one quarter cash and one quarter each year for three years thereafter, with interest on the deferred payments at six per cent."

"Much too much!" Brander protested blusteringly. "What do you think I am—the United States Treasury?"

"Well, after you've paid sixty per cent of the purchase price, we might consent to carry you on mortgage for, say, ten years on the balance at six per cent. Might as well keep our money working, Brander."

"If it's a fair question, what was the name of the broker who approached you?"

"I have no objection to telling you. His name is

David Dever, and he has an office in the Lumbermen's Building in this city."

"I don't know him. Well, I'm dealing direct, and if a deal results I'll save you a five per cent commission. Is two dollars absolutely your lowest price, Mr. Robinson?"

"You couldn't buy that timber for a dollar and ninety-nine cents, Brander. That is my last word."

"What will a six months' option cost me?"

"Fifty thousand dollars, to be applied on the purchase price, of course, in the event you exercise your option."

The instinct of the gambler in Jacob Brander conquered him, and his selfishness helped. He wanted the Hale-Robinson timber. Somebody else wanted it, too.

"I'll think this over," he informed old man Robinson. "I have a feeling I'll take an option. Will you give me a verbal option until noon to-morrow?"

"Glad to—free gratis!" The thought of obtaining even fifty thousand dollars on account of the expense of maintaining his white elephant made the old man almost human. Indeed, the moment Jacob Brander left his office the canny old man telephoned his attorney to draw up the option and send it over immediately.

Straight to the offices of the Banning interests Jacob Brander went, but a telephone message from Robinson to the president of the latter company preceded him.

"Hey, Jim," old Robinson cackled, "that fat-headed fool of a son of old Jake Brander is headed for your office. That is, I think he is. I know I would be if

I stood in his shoes. He's just been in to see me to get a price on our timber holdings in the upper Columbia River basin. I asked him two dollars, and he has practically assured me that he will take an option for six months so I gave him, at his request, a verbal option until noon to-morrow. For Heaven's sake, Jim, don't undercut my price. In fact, raise yours to two and a half; then we might both get together and saw off our stuff on him for two dollars."

"Two dollars would be a gift," the other replied, "if the O. R. N. ever built into that country. And they have just sent up an engineer to make a preliminary report of the probable route."

"Yes, I know that. But I'm too old, Jim, to take on new responsibilities at my age, and Hale's heirs have all the money they want. They don't know how to operate a sawmill, anyhow. You're no spring chicken yourself, Jim, and neither is your brother or sister. Two dollars a thousand would get us both out with a profit."

"Very well, I'll play ball with you."

An hour after entering the Banning office Jacob Brander, his worst fears confirmed, departed with Banning's assurance that he would have an option drawn up at once, and be prepared to sign it immediately upon receipt of the Brander Timber Company's check for $50,000.

What a blessing a clever woman was to a clever man, Brander reflected. Mercedes was out of place as the wife of a pedant like Julian Grannis. Thanks to her information (which Brander believed he could rely upon, considering its source), and the speed with

which he had acted, he had beaten some other crowd to the punch. He knew these old timber operators with whom he had just been in session. Their word once passed, it was their bond. He would formally close both deals in the morning, then casually drop in on the broker, Dever, and inform him that not only was he not interested in disposing of the holdings of the Brander Timber Company, but that he had recently secured a six months' option on the Banning and Hale-Robinson stumpage, and that he would exercise his option too.

No harm in being a bit talkative. Dever would promptly communicate this information to his principal. Then, if the principal was unduly interested, Dever might attempt to negotiate for him the sale of all three bodies of timber at a nice quick profit.

Well, he had six months in which to formulate his plans, and the report of the engineers would be in within three months. Then the railroad people would call him into conference, in order to secure his assurance that he would erect sawmills to provide them with the freight which is the lifeblood of a railroad. Of course, to exercise his option personally would constitute a mouthful larger than he could chew, but in a pinch he could incorporate a company and share the good thing with others, and still emerge with a huge profit.

He was jubilant. Of course, he had entered upon another gamble, but (he told himself) one could scarcely call it that in view of the fact that other people were after the same holdings. And he had beaten them to the prize! It was conceivable that he might

unload his options and his own timber on them at a handsome profit! . . . Well, he had the most of the timber in that country cornered. . . . The railroad people would have to talk to him now. . . . Conversely, he would have to talk to them; and when he did so the cards would have to be on the table.

Having optioned their holdings to him for six months, the Banning and Hale-Robinson people could not assure the railroad people that they would erect sawmills to provide lumber freight, and unless that assurance was forthcoming, naturally the railroad would not be built; in which event Jacob Brander would be left with not one white elephant on his hands but three! . . . Well, suppose he did lose the $100,000 he had paid for his options? He could afford the loss. . . . This was to be his last gamble . . . absolutely. But he must play his hand carefully. . . . There seemed no necessity for losing.

He paid a visit to Dever and filled the broker with information. A month later Dever called him up at Los Angeles and, on behalf of a client, offered him $2.50 a thousand for all of the holdings he now owned and, for six months, controlled.

He refused to consider the offer. Foolish, he argued with himself, to snatch at the first bait cast. But he was trembling with the gambler's ague as he hung up; he could not refrain from a contemplation of his chickens before they were hatched any more than he could stifle a cheer before he was out of the woods. He wired Mercedes Grannis at Reno, Nev.:

JUST REFUSED MILLION PROFIT ON TIMBER DEAL MADE ON STRENGTH YOUR TIP LOVE JAKE

With a light heart, Jacob Brander sent in his card to E. M. Gruber, first vice president and general manager of the O. R. N. in Chicago. Mr. Gruber was the type of executive whom one can readily visualize as sitting behind an expensive desk and saying "No!" with singular bluntness and directness. He looked up at Jacob Brander, when, after a wait of an hour, the latter gained access to him, and said coldly:

"What can I do for you, Mr. Brander?"

"You know who I am?"

"You're old Jake Brander's son, I take it."

Jacob Brander bowed.

"You don't look like your father," Gruber went on. "I knew him very well. He used to assault us about twice a year. Wanted us to build a line into some timber he owned up at the head of the Columbia River basin."

"Father's dead, but I inherited the habit," Brander rejoined. He had a very pleasant approach toward those he feared or respected. "I also inherited that timber."

Mr. Gruber seemed to withdraw an infinitesimal distance into himself, and waited for Brander to continue.

"I heard my dad's assaults are at last beginning to bear fruit, Mr. Gruber, and that the O. R. N. is very seriously considering the building of a road to tap that area."

"We are always considering tapping some new freight area, Mr. Brander. New business is the life-blood of a railroad. However, few of the areas we

consider are ever exploited. There's always a catch in them."

Mr. Gruber was apparently unwilling to admit anything; and since this was not to Brander's liking, the latter continued the attack.

"I understand you have an engineering crew in that country now, making a survey of a route?"

"The Portland office must have sent them out if that is so, Mr. Brander."

"Well, they're there, Mr. Gruber."

"I wonder why?" Gruber was mildly interested.

"Probably because the freight business is there waiting for the road to be built. Not a bad reason, I take it, Mr. Gruber. And I might add," Brander went on, "that if I had any tangible reason to believe that your people are in earnest about building into that country, I would begin to consider very seriously the erection of three of the finest and largest sawmills in the Northwest. And that would mean three sawmill towns, three large pay rolls and quite a lot of collateral freight and passenger business."

"What would be your daily cut?" Gruber had withdrawn from himself a little; Brander saw that he was interested now.

"Oh, quit fencing with me, Gruber. Our interests in this matter are mutual. Your people will not build the road until you have the right assurances of sufficient lumbering operations to make the investment worth while; nor will I consider operating in that timber until I have the right assurances that I can freight my output to market. My cut would be not

less than 500,000 feet daily per mill, under average market conditions."

"I have had some conversation with other large timber owners in that district," Gruber admitted, as if loath to disclose a secret, "and I had intended sounding you out as to your intentions. I am glad you called, Mr. Brander."

"Well, you know my intentions. Naturally I don't care to leave that timber stand indefinitely if I can possibly start lumbering operations. There are a number of smaller holders in that country who have timber enough to last from ten to twenty years, and I imagine many of them will be inspired to operate also."

"I've canvassed them all and know what each one will do, or rather what each one thinks he will do." Gruber was reluctantly coming down to brass tacks, now that he had felt out his ground. "There was some talk of sending an engineering crew in there to make a preliminary report; and if your information is correct and we have such a crew in there, I imagine the report will be in my hands within sixty days. If it is favorable, I have every faith that we will proceed promptly to do our share." He pondered a moment and added: "I hear the Banning people and the Hale-Robinson outfit have given an option on their holdings to somebody."

"I have options on both parcels of timber, Mr. Gruber."

"Biting off quite a mouthful, are you not, Brander?"

"Quite—but I can chew it, if I elect to exercise my options."

Gruber considered this: "Well, if you do not exer-

cise them, I imagine you can sell them, and if you do not do that and forfeit your options the present owners will go ahead, anyhow. The building of our line will make that timber too valuable to permit of its standing uncut." He commenced rearranging a pile of papers on his desk, an infallible sign on the part of a busy executive that an interview is ended. "Drop around in about sixty days," he suggested. "I'll probably have something definite to tell you then."

"I'll come whenever you wire me, Mr. Gruber. However, you can readily understand that speed is the essence of my plans. If I am going to exercise my options, I must have a little time to provide for some major financing. I will have a number of prominent Middle-West lumbermen associated with me—men with sufficient capital to attempt this gigantic enterprise and carry it through to a successful conclusion. This is to be no small operation."

"I understand. Well, I'll wire you. Good day."

As the door closed behind Jacob Brander, the railroad executive's cold face grew a shade colder. "Only three generations from shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves!" he soliloquized. "That man Brander is a bigger man than he seems to be, or a bigger fool than appears possible. He's a gambler, but this time he's gambling on a red-hot tip. Wonder where he got his information? Not from Whitton, I'll guarantee that. A game devil—taking on options like that in the present state of overproduction of the lumber market. Nevertheless, if Whitton's preliminary report is favorable, I wouldn't be surprised if that fat bird picks up a few easy millions."

CHAPTER X

Ben Whitton had walked many miles over hill and dale in the wilderness of the land through which he was surveying the route for a railroad. The day had been unusually warm and, after the fashion of big men, he had perspired freely, accumulated an ache in each ankle, a blister on one heel and two wood ticks which had settled between his shoulder blades and dug in. To add to his discomfort, he thought longingly of the bucking up a long cool highball might afford him, but, although he had whisky and a number of bottles of soda chilling in the snowy waters of an adjacent stream, his code forbade that he drink alone.

"Saturday night," he thought hopefully. "Julie's been gone a week with his crew, but he'll ride over to spend the week-end with me. He knows it would be a crime to make me ride a horse over to visit him at his camp. Two hundred and twenty pounds of civil engineer, plus forty pounds of saddle, would be no kindness to a nine-hundred-pound cayuse. Moreover, I have the mail . . . yes, he'll come. I've wished it."

He stripped, gave himself a hot, vigorous sponge bath from a bucket, doused a few buckets of snow water over his naked body, donned a striking suit of pajamas and an old dressing gown and thrust his aching feet into a tub of hot water which the cook brought him. Then he lit his pipe and made the dis-

turbing discovery that he was breaking out with poison oak.

"Wretched inside and out," he mourned.

A horseman came in over the trail from civilization, bringing a large packet of mail. Whitton fell upon it, sorted out his own and laid Julie's on the latter's bed, after inspecting the envelopes carefully. There were two addressed in a woman's handwriting and the postmark showed they had been mailed in San Francisco.

"Ah! Playing the game, I see," Whitton decided. "Had a notion she would."

In his own mail he found a letter from Gloria Justin:

DEAR BEN:

Nothing of particular interest at the office since you left. Have had two inquiries on new jobs, and have asked the people making the inquiry to write you direct. I have wired Haugh & Ballantyne, who are now well along on the irrigation job at San Ardo, to run over to both these prospects, look them over, make up independent estimates and forward their figures to you, together with a detailed report of the conditions.

Thanks so much for the offer of the use of your car. I accepted, for Mother's sake, and we enjoyed the week-end at Del Monte, but I paid my own expenses. Friendship will stand up under anything except financial encroachments.

I remembered that you are subject to attacks of poison oak when you go afield, so I am sending you, in this mail by parcel post, a quantity of sugar of lead and opium, with a prescription for using it. When the solution is as hot as you can stand it, dip a piece of heavy flannel in it and apply to the afflicted parts. I have also sent a roll of heavy flannel, otherwise you

may be reduced to the grave extremity of sacrificing a shirt tail.

Sincerely,

GLORIA.

Ben Whitton kissed the letter. "Dear, thoughtful girl," he murmured. "A woman with the priceless gift of understanding and sympathy. Oh, Julie, Julie! You ass!"

He opened another large envelope from his office. In it was a smaller envelope, sealed, and another letter from Gloria, which read:

"I gave instructions that this report should be forwarded sealed. I have no interest in reading it and did not wish to be under the suspicion of having done so. The matter involved is none of my business, and sometimes I doubt very much if it is any of yours. The situation is one of great delicacy, and must be handled with greater delicacy, otherwise it is conceivable that a slip may involve complications between you and a certain party, and that would be terrible. Destroy this memorandum, and when you have read the report destroy that, as there is a carbon copy on file for future reference, if necessary."

Ben struck a match and burned Gloria's letter, then opened the sealed envelope, which was addressed to Gloria Justin. It was a report from an individual who styled himself Operative K and ran as follows:

"Following instructions, picked up subject at Palace Hotel, as subject was leaving for ferry depot. Ascertained from hotel porter that he had purchased for subject Drawing-room A, Train No. 16, Southern Pacific, with transportation to Portland, via Salt Lake City and Ogden, with one-day stop-over privilege at

Reno. Followed subject in taxi to ferry depot and verified this information as subject passed through gate. Reported back to office."

A second sheet contained the report of Operative M

"In conformity with telephone instructions, boarded train No. 16, Southern Pacific, at Verdi, first station west of Reno, at 8 A.M. 5th inst. Located subject in Drawing-room A. Left train with him at Reno, where he was met by a woman with whom he entered taxi and drove to apartment house No. 324 Washoe Avenue. Somebody started playing a violin shortly thereafter. At noon both parties left apartment and motored to road house in country for luncheon, returning at three to apartment. Have name of road house and list of dishes partaken of by both people there, but have not included it in this report. At seven o'clock subject drove to station with lady, who kissed him good-by. Subject departed on train 12 to continue journey, and operative ceased work on him then."

Ben Whitton's satisfied smile as he read this report could have been likened to nothing on earth, in the sky or under the sea, except a crocodile trying to laugh. He forgot his oak poisoning, his blistered heel, his wood ticks, his weariness, his mild urge for alcoholic stimulant. "Six o'clock, and all's well," he murmured and reached for an envelope that bore the return address of David Dever. He read:

MY DEAR MR. WHITTON:

I have, without revealing your identity, made the Brander Timber Company (Mr. Jacob Brander, Junior) an offer of $2.50 per thousand feet stumpage on the Brander timber, and also the Banning and

Hale-Robinson timber which he holds under six months' option. He has declined the offer so vigorously that I feel it would be idle to pursue the matter further. I learn that he has invested $100,000 in these options; hence it would seem that it is his intention to exercise them.

Yours, etc. —— ——

"That man Brander," Mr. Whitton murmured, "is smarter than I gave him credit for being. Because of my carelessness in mentioning confidential business matters in the presence of Mercedes Grannis, he has been enabled to climb in on the ground floor, and it certainly looks to B. Fido Whitton, Esquire, as if the said B. Fido had unintentionally presented the fathead with about $5,000,000 worth of inside information. If Mercedes hadn't been careless, I'd never have known."

He was a trifle uneasy over the situation. The railroad people had impressed upon him the necessity for discretion, for absolute silence regarding this important job. If it should ever be discovered that he had been unethical, even unintentionally, his standing in his profession would be seriously impaired.

Of course, once his suspicions had been aroused, he could not rest until he had confirmed them. For that reason he had sought out the broker, Dever, and asked him to communicate an offer to Jacob Brander. The refusal of this offer, with the further information that the timber was not for sale, was sufficiently convincing proof to Ben Whitton that Mercedes had betrayed him, and instantly Whitton's agile brain had leaped to a plan designed to frustrate Brander's additional use

of the information. He would make the fellow pay for his fancies, at any rate—cause him to make a sizable bet if he really intended to sit in the game in a big way.

Hence Ben's request to Dever to sound out the Banning and Hale-Robinson interests before Brander could get in contact with them. Ben was shrewd enough to realize that two offers within a week on timber that had been unsalable for a quarter of a century would cause these owners to proceed with caution, to run the price up on Brander, to make him pay well for an option to purchase.

If Ben could not block Brander's use of the information conveyed to him by Mercedes Grannis, then he would see to it that the timber cost Brander double. Consequently, when Dever told him of Brander's operations, Ben did some more quick thinking.

Undoubtedly the railroad would be built. But before committing themselves to build, the railroad people would have to have ample assurances from the timber people that mills would be installed. If, at the very last, it should develop that the road was not going to be built, Brander would not exercise his options. Hence he would lose $100,000. Ben thought that would be very fine news, indeed, but if Brander could be induced to exercise his options and then discover that the railroad had abandoned its plans—well, that would be much finer news.

Ben had, through Dever, offered Brander a nice profit, knowing that it would be refused. The first offer is never accepted; the owner of a desirable property for which a sudden market has developed holds

on to the last, playing one customer against the other until he regards himself as infallible in the matter of titanic business deals.

"In about a month," Mr. Whitton murmured, "I'll have Dever offer Brander twenty-five cents a thousand more. Little by little I'll raise my offer until I'm up to four or five dollars. Brander will refuse every offer, but he will use Denver's letters and telegrams to convince men to whom he desires to sell stock in his enterprise that the enterprise is sound and appreciating in value every day. If I can tease him along with good news of the projected railroad, but nothing very definite, he may get desperate and do one of two things: decline to exercise his options and pocket $100,000 loss, or take a chance, exercise the options and—well, after that Jake Brander will be in the lap of the gods, and I hope they prove malignant gods."

He burned all the letters relating to Mercedes Grannis.

Presently Julie rode into camp. He came to the door of Ben's living tent and said politely:

"You sent for me, Mr. Whitton?"

"I certainly did—and you've been a long time coming. Mail for you, kid."

Julie came in, sat down on his camp cot and read his letters. Ben, watching him covertly, saw that their contents were, apparently, not disturbing. Julie tucked them back in their envelopes and buttoned them into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt.

"I'm suffering from poison oak," Ben announced gloomily. "I'd be in a devil of a state in four or five days if Gloria hadn't remembered I'm subject to it.

She's sent up some medicine and a recipe for using it. Take care of me, Julie, old son. I'm so tired a baby could beat me to death with a lead pencil."

Obediently Julie prepared the sugar of lead and opium solution and applied it, piping hot, to the rash on Ben's great abdomen. Then, when he saw the blister on the Whitton heel, he opened it, put iodine on it and taped it. With pincers he removed the wood ticks.

"A man who has been in the army and who knows what a blistered heel means, and who, nevertheless, persists in buying field boots that do not fit him—" Julie began.

"Field boots perfect. It's the damned socks. Glorias' dear old mother knitted them for me."

"Wasn't Gloria thoughtful to send up this dope?" said Julie. "But that's just like her. Not only thinks of the right thing to do but proceeds at once to do it."

"A man," Mr. Whitton murmured, "could take a chance and marry Gloria without bothering to be in love with her. That would come later—if a selfish sense of peace and comfort didn't kill it first."

Julie decided his friend was getting on dangerous ground. "You might ask me if I have a mouth, Ben," he suggested. "After the heat and the burdens of the day——"

"Ah, yes, old son. Attend to it. What's the good news from Mercedes?"

"Nothing of particular interest. Dull recital of dull events in a dull life. Old gal's lonesome."

After supper they lay in their respective camp cots and discussed their work. From without came the sounds inseparable from such an expedition; the clat-

ter of the camp cook's pans, the shuffle and snort and stamping of horses and mules, a stock wrangler's banjo accompanying an Italian roustabout, the rattle of poker chips in the big tent where Ben's youthful assistants had their abode.

For a long time, Julie had lain listening to it and pulling silently at his pipe. Suddenly he said: "Sweet, isn't it?"

"What's sweet?"

"This life of ours. Doing big jobs for big people, making the world rock on its silly heels: hard work, rough food, good appetites—" He threw out a slim, artistic hand. "All this—life."

"Liberty!" Ben Whitton corrected, and they lapsed again into one of their long, comforting, revelatory silences. Then Julie spoke again:

"I've had an interesting week with my boys, Ben. Plenty of water in this country—oodles of it—yonder. I've found half a dozen power sites that would be worth millions in their undeveloped state, if one could only be certain of developing them and getting his hydroelectric power to the bridgeheads of market. They're like this timber—inaccessible, hence valueless. I've found a cañon, with a bottle neck, at six thousand feet, dropping nine hundred feet in a mile. Sheer hills on both sides. Three gorgeous sites for power stations. Lead your water from the dam at the bottle neck, down along the ridges of these hills, then drop it down a seventy-degree slope to the penstocks . . . Ben, there's a fair-sized little river running through that cañon now. In the winter the run-off must be tremendous . . . enough to tack a big irrigation pro-

ject onto the power end of it if there's a way of leading the water through the hills down to some distant agricultural community, after it's gone through the power stations and done its appointed work."

"Whose land is it on, Julie?"

"I don't know."

"I'll find out. The information might come in handy some day."

"It will come in handy if somebody—I hope I shall be that somebody—can solve the problem of delivering four hundred and forty thousand volts five hundred miles, without interconnection with local steam plants. Two hundred and four miles and two hundred and twenty-thousand volts is the record to date. And there's some loss in transit—seventeen volts to the mile. Got to save that loss in transit—got to deliver double the dose, double the distance over high transmission lines that will cost but little more per mile to build. Got to figure out a scheme to deliver voltage by the million."

"Any closer to solving the problem, Julie?"

"Good place to think about it up here, Ben. I think I am a little closer. Get a flash now and then. Pulled a new stunt just before I left the Western Sierras people, Ben. Took two two hundred and ten mercury lamps and after placing them side by side and three inches apart got a steady stream of juice between them —*without a wire*. Gives me an idea. I'm ordering a lot of junk which, when set up, will, I am confident, enable me to throw a synthetic thunderbolt of three million six hundred thousand volts twenty feet between two aluminum spheres. I've tried it on a smaller scale.

Used an oscillograph to record photographs of it—two millionth of a second exposure—and discovered something that almost makes my reason totter on its throne. The pictures show tiny streams of light emanating from the metal in lines perpendicular to the spherical surface. I think they're electrons, issuing from the metal, speeding devils of power that suggest a physical change taking place in the aluminum under the intensity of the charge. I must study this more. It holds incalculable possibilities. I'm going to get six big condensers of the latest type. They're reservoirs of energy. I'll charge them all together—on rank, at six hundred thousand volts each ('crest')—and discharge them simultaneously in single file to net three million six hundred thousand volts of short duration—say, two micro-seconds. That ought to bring out flocks of electrons. You see, Ben, there are about fifteen thousand electrons running amuck in each cubic inch of air, and when three million six hundred thousand volts come along, they get a knock-out wallop."

"All of which leads up to what, Julie?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I'll never find out. But I'll monkey with the idea, hoping it may lead to something. A heap of fun, anyhow."

Julie sat up on his bed. "I tell you, Ben, the secret will come out. It can't remain bottled up. I wish my mind was free to grapple with the monster, to the exclusion of all other mundane things."

"You should never have married, old son."

"Yes," Julie admitted sadly, "marriage, the fight for bread and butter, are hobbles on the creative mind."

Ben Whitton's deep, ironical chuckle filled the tent.

"Stay up here in the woods, after your survey is finished, and lie abed and starve to death," he urged. "Nobody will disturb you. Think till it hurts, hombre. The way to do a thing is to do it. Be ruthless. Brook no opposition to a job worth while. Nothing else matters."

"A fine slogan in theory, Ben." Julie's mood was still serious. "When the problem is solved, two bright boys, knowing what they know, might grab off these power sites I've been giving a cursory investigation. A recommendation by me would make Capital sit up and scratch its ear. Might get them financed and sit in on a cut of the pie, eh, Ben?"

"What's in your mind, boy friend?"

"I think," Julie replied slowly, "I'll take you over to these sites when your railroad job is done. I'll make estimates of cost for the power stations, select the sites for them. Then you and your gang can select the dam site, and estimate the cost of dams and ditches."

"You mean we should spend a lot of our own money making a puncture-proof set-up to exhibit to Wall Street, on the chance that some day this natural resource will be available?"

"I mean we'll spend some of my money."

"That's different."

"It's a job for one electrical engineer and one civil engineer—and those two must be men who can trust each other. These dam and power station sites, this whole drainage area, will be available at a very low price, if we act before the world realizes what has happened. The stream I have in mind flows into the

Columbia River. There are no agricultural lands riparian to it—according to the map. Water rights will not cost much, as such rights go nowadays. We'll figure this whole thing out to a feather edge, prepare everything, have our detailed reports ready—and when the time comes we can act in jig time."

"We will be here much longer than we anticipated," Ben Whitton replied. And that was all of his acceptance.

Julie looked at him with real affection. "Thanks for your great faith," he answered.

Jacob Brander for sixty days had been as busy as the proverbial one-armed man saddling a colt. To all overtures he had turned a deaf ear, but they excited him nevertheless and inculcated in him very firmly the belief that at last he had embarked upon a deal that would not only win back for him all the money he had lost in other speculations, but enable him to achieve the dearest wish of his heart: i.e., increase the fortune his father had left him.

Before he could set to work actively upon a deal he had outlined, however, there was that distressing matter of his divorce from Mrs. Brander. What a fool he had been to permit her to stampede him into a pre-divorce settlement! He should have opposed her. He might have known she was bluffing. But why weep over spilled milk? Nothing now remained, insofar as she was concerned, save the Paris divorce, and in this matter Mrs. Brander was kind enough to give him ample notice of the date of the trial.

He jumped to New York, caught a steamer for Cherbourg and was in Paris six days later. The fol-

lowing day the mummery and humbug of a French divorce was got over with. That night he and his ex-wife dined pleasantly at Voisin's; the following day he flew to Southampton, caught a steamer home and hopped from New York to Chicago, where he called upon the president of the O. R. N. only to be informed that the Chicago office had no information on the subject so close to the Brander heart. The Portland office was in charge of that detail. He was assured, however, that whatever the Portland office recommended would undoubtedluy be acted upon.

Thereupon Brander visited several old friends of his father's in Michigan and Wisconsin and laid the details of his proposition before them. He besought an investment by them "on the ground floor," but they were old men for whom the lure of dollar chasing had lost much of its glamour: for various reasons they declined to join Brander in making up a syndicate. So back he went to New York and for two weeks talked with various financial houses and bankers. Finally he so impressed the head of one huge bond house that assurance was given him that if, upon investigation, his statements appeared to be substantiated—if they could satisfy themselves that the O. R. N. was going to build into the timber and thus make it accessible to market—there would be no difficulty in floating a bond issue to provide funds to pay for the timber, erect sawmills, etc., and provide necessary operating capital.

Brander saw that they were genuinely interested. And why not? They would sell the bonds to the public at par and retain ten points for their services.

Greatly heartened, therefore, Jacob Brander rushed to Portland, Ore., where he gathered about him millwrights, experienced sawmill operators and salesmen from sawmill-machinery houses, electrical engineers, etc., and for another month worked twelve hours a day making up his estimates. He made a liberal allowance for items not foreseen and forwarded his set-up to the New York bond house, together with his old cruising reports, his abstracts of title brought up to date and half a dozen additional offers from timber brokers, to prove that the timber he purposed deeding to the Brander Timber Company now had a present market value of four dollars per thousand feet stumpage, or just one hundred per cent over its cost.

He now had time to call upon Gruber, the resident vice president and general manager of the O. R. N. Mr. Gruber received him very cordially.

"Well," Brander queried, "what news have you for me?"

"Looks as if we're going to build."

"Good. I'm all set to provide lumber freight. I've been working on this deal and have it practically financed."

"Bond issue?"

Brander nodded. "Booth, Kunze & Morrow of New York."

"Will they take the entire issue?"

"They haven't definitely promised, but they are much interested. They will have my set-up before them in two days and will then make a decision."

"Well," Gruber replied, "they're able to do anything they say they'll do. When you have your con-

tract signed with them, come in and see me again. All that we require is assurance that your mills will be built and operated; then we'll fly to it."

"Great! By the way, would your people consider building logging spurs to freight our logs down to the mills? That would be additional freight for you—and you already have all the necessary equipment."

"I feel assured we would, Mr. Brander."

"Thank you. Well, as soon as I have completed my deal with Booth, Kunze & Morrow we'll get together again. How about the hydroelectric development in that country? My mills would, of course, be electrically driven."

Gruber looked at him keenly. "What makes you ask that question, Brander? The hydroelectric end of this deal is one we are not interested in. That's a matter for you to look into."

"I thought," Brander replied innocently, "that it was a phase of the situation your people were much interested in, because it has a distinct bearing on the economic operation of the mills. The electrically driven sawmill is cheaper and far less expensive to operate than a steam-driven plant, and naturally your people are interested in seeing that the sources of your revenue from lumber and log freights can be operated at a profit, which means that they must be operated economically. And if you didn't have this in mind, why did you employ the finest electrical engineer in the country—Julian Grannis—to investigate and make a report to you?"

Gruber laughed. "You seem rather well primed with inside information, Brander. Well, I'll admit we

have made such an investigation and Grannis' report is most favorable. How much have you allowed, in your estimates, for the installation of a hydroelectric plant, etc.?"

"Nothing. But I allowed a million dollars for items unforeseen."

"That will more than cover it, according to the report we have from Grannis. Mind letting me see a copy of your set-up?"

Brander smilingly handed it to him. "I'll study it —let our own experts glance over it," Gruber replied. "Look in on me in thirty days."

Thirty days later Brander was back, and upon Gruber's desk he laid a signed contract between the Brander Timber Company and the bond house of Booth, Kunze & Morrow, whereby the latter agreed to furnish the necessary capital in exchange for thirty-year six per cent first-mortgage bonds on timber lands, plants, etc. Gruber read it through slowly and carefully.

"I am instructed to commence work on the railroad as soon as assured of your ability to finance."

"You'll notice that this contract with Booth, Kunze & Morrow provides for its nullification in the event that you should decide not to build."

"I noticed that. Well, we're going to build."

"I suppose the Brander Timber Company ought to enter into some sort of contract with the O. R. N., whereby the former agrees to erect sawmills and furnish certain minimum tonnage for the railroad, which, on its part, binds itself to build the road."

"My very dear Mr. Brander!" Gruber was smiling.

"You have furnished acceptable evidence of your sincerity and ability to perform, and we have accepted your word that you will perform. The O. R. N. is, as you know, quite able to finance this branch road, and you have been assured—indeed, you have had rather excellent assurances—of our interest in the enterprise. Moreover, I have just assured you that we will perform our part. In fact, we are anxious to and have merely been awaiting the fulfillment of your plans. A contract is not necessary, and I doubt if our people will consider entering into one. You'll have to take our word for it."

"When will you commence work?"

"Immediately. We will start at once to build our camps, arrange for labor, build roads and get our equipment in. That should be sufficiently convincing to you, Mr. Brander."

"It will be. Booth, Kunze & Morrow must also be convinced before they accept the bonds."

"You're bonding the property for exactly what most of it cost you, so the basic security is O.K., isn't it? Railroad or no railroad, those bonds will be sold. You do not have to worry over Booth, Kunze & Morrow. They're out to make money by selling bonds for which they accept no responsibility, and that's the only reason why they took you in. You showed a good set-up."

When Brander's options had but thirty days more to run he knew that the railroad was going to be built. He visited the camps of the O. R. N., observed the preliminary work upon which the company was engaged, took dozens of photographs of it, and went on to New York, where he secured a million dollars on a

block of bonds covering the Brander Company's holdings. With this money in the bank, he hurried back to Portland and exercised his options on the Hale-Robinson and Banning properties and, since he planned to bond these properties later, he paid for them in full and took title in fee.

However, the million dollars he had raised in New York was not sufficient to do this, so he made up the deficit from his own fortune—and that cost him another million, which he was hard put to get together.

"No sense in borrowing this money from Booth, Kunze & Morrow until I need it," he decided. "I can't set about the erection of mills and power plants until the railroad has been completed and I am enabled to freight my stuff in and start building."

He opened an office in Portland and appointed a general manager.

He had six months to wait. Therefore, with the pressure of urgent business relieved, his thoughts turned to Mercedes Grannis. He had written her on an average of twice a week, until some six weeks previous, when a telegram from her had warned him not to write her again until she advised him; that certain precautions were necessary due to complications which she would advise him of when she saw him.

He was not a good correspondent, and this freedom from the duty of writing her, at a time when he had little time to think of her, pleased him. "Sensible girl," he soliloquized. "Knows her way about. Too wise to tag after a busy man until his rush is over."

Upon the completion of his survey, Ben Whitton had moved his camp over into the country where Julie

had reported the hydroelectric possibilities and set his men to work on that job, while he took a flying trip back to San Francisco to look after some important matters which had, of necessity, been rather neglected during his absence.

From the ferry depot, he went direct to his office, let himself in through the door of his private office, tossed his bag in a corner, sat in at his desk—and pressed a push button for his secretary.

Gloria entered and started, in surprise, at sight of her chief.

"Hello, Gloria," he greeted her, and, half rising, held out his hand. "What's new?"

"I'm so glad you've come, Ben." Gloria sat down. "When is Julie coming back?"

"Oh, in a couple of weeks. We're working on a private job. I'm going back in four or five days to help finish it up. Why?"

She ignored his query. "Was he—in—good spirits when you left?"

"Merry as a meadow lark."

"Then he hasn't heard?"

"You mean bad news from Mercedes?" She nodded.

"Apparently not, Gloria. What's doing?"

"She's suing him for a divorce in Reno, alleging mental cruelty and incompatibility."

Ben smiled widely. "Well, we figured she would do that, didn't we? Why get excited over it? She hasn't been able to get personal service on Julie, so she's hung up until that detail has been attended to. Then Julie may take a notion to fight her plea for a

divorce. There's quite as much sanity and justice dealt out in the Nevada courts as in states where the divorce laws are not so flexible."

"She doesn't have to get personal service on him. She can secure service by publication: ninety days in a weekly newspaper of general circulation in the county where the suit is brought. At the end of that period, if he hasn't answered the suit, she can secure a divorce by default."

"How many times has the notice appeared?"

"Three. The detective agency reported to me. I hadn't instructed it to, but it caught the notice and sent it to me on general principles."

Ben Whitton sat back in his chair and drummed on his desk with his stubby big fingers. "Well," he rumbled presently, "God's good, isn't he? Ordinarily I wouldn't say a word to Julie about this, but just let Nature take her course until the bright day when he wakes up and, to his vast surprise, finds himself a divorced man. But——"

"You must advise him, Ben. It isn't fair to him. He'd never forgive you—or me."

"How is he going to find it out? Even Mercedes doesn't know that you and I know she is in Reno, and why. She'll marry Brander, I daresay, the day after her divorce is granted. Ordinarily, Gloria, that would be water on my wheel, but, unfortunately, it isn't—just now. Brander's just gone into a huge timber deal and stands to make more money than some folks have hay." He looked up at the girl quizzically. "Somehow I don't quite relish the idea of Mercedes marrying such a potential bank roll. And I've changed my mind

about Brander. I think he's much too good for Mercedes—the abandoned, heartless, mercenary, scheming cat! I'm going to bust up her combination, expose her to Julie, break his brittle heart right in two, infuriate him and induce him to sue her for a divorce in this state. That will require time—say eighteen months before she will be free to marry Brander—and by that time the fat fool may change his mind."

And suddenly Ben Whitton laid his head on his desk and commenced to laugh immoderately. "Oh, Gloria," he gasped, "what a finale to that woman's schemes! Julie has a fortune, and she doesn't know it, so she's playing for a fortune from Brander. If I can euchre her out of both fortunes and both men, I shall feel that my sojourn on this earth has not been in vain. Whatever happens, Julie's bound to suffer. No matter from what direction the blow comes, it's going to knock him to a parade rest! So why hesitate? I'm going to stop these divorce proceedings and do it now."

He drew a small black memorandum book from his vest pocket and searched through it for an address. "Take telegram," he ordered.

Mrs. Julian Grannis,
324 Washoe Avenue, Reno, Nevada.

I have my eye on you Mercedes Stop Before you proceed further in your literary endeavors come down to San Francisco and see me because there is blood on the moon and when I am aroused I am terrible Stop Kill that notice you are running in the *Argus* Stop Julie is still up north but a wire from me will bring him running and then what a fall will there be, my

countrywoman Stop He can get enough on you from me to hang you Stop Cheerio.

B. Fido Whitton.

"You're going to prevent her divorce?" Gloria could not believe what he had dictated.

"You bet I am, my dear," he replied cheerfully. "I'm a dirty old pup. When a tramp shows up around my shack I never bark. I bite."

CHAPTER XI

THE effect upon Mercedes Grannis when she received Ben Whitton's telegram was not at first so electric as the latter had imagined would be the case. She read it calmly, then reread it—and laughed, finding something very amusing in this evidence of the stolid Whitton's ability to change his mind with feminine alacrity; because she was free of his dominating presence; because his terrible eyes could not, at this distance, arouse her to torments of conscience, or fear, she could think clearly in this crisis that confronted her adroitly laid plans.

"He knows I'm here—and why!" she reasoned. "That means he must have had me watched from the beginning. He wrote me that, if I left the city, to keep Julie in ignorance of my departure. Could it be that, even then, he suspected I was planning to come here? He warned me that my letters to Julie must bear a San Francisco postmark, so I followed his instructions. Of course, that Gloria Justin saw the Reno postmark on the envelope in which I enclosed my letter to Julie, for her to mail to him. Naturally she reported to Whitton.

"But why should I mind? I knew Whitton would protect me. Hadn't he told me he would be delighted to see me divorced from Julie? He's let this affair run along without interference until I've established

my residence and filed my suit, but now that I am seeking service on Julie by publication he has changed his mind. I wonder why. He knows that Julie and I are thoroughly unsuited to each other—that the break is bound to come sooner or later. Why does he interfere now? Why does he threaten? He knows a divorce is the best thing that could happen to Julie and me and that I have taken the easiest, quietest method of securing it.

"Perhaps he objects to the method I have employed. He even threatens me. I wonder if he's bluffing. I think he's a monumental bluff. He hates me. Perhaps he wants to prevent my suit going to trial and so arrange matters that Julie can sue me in the California courts and be awarded the decree."

This thought gave her pause. If Julie elected to fight her suit, she was not at all convinced that she could win it, even in Reno—and the odious Whitton might be Julie's corroborative witness in a suit in California and tell the judge things that would not reflect credit on her reputation. Although indiscreet, Mercedes knew herself for a faithful wife, as her kind defined faithfulness; her tenacious, albeit slightly twisted morality had caused her to dread always the gossip of her friends, to cling to conventional respectability with all the fervor of a drowning man clinging to an oar.

Instantly she was panicky. She had planned quite coolly and deliberately to marry Jacob Brander, and to have that plan miscarry now might be fatal.

It was characteristic of her to consider her financial situation in the event of a miscarriage of her

plans. She and Julie had never accumulated any community property, and even if they had, a Reno divorce would debar the judge from any attempt to adjudicate the matter of community property not in the jurisdiction of his court. She was not even aware that the Reno judge could award her alimony, since the source of the alimony, being outside his jurisdiction, could not be forced to pay under threat of contempt of court. What, then, would become of her if Julie nullified her attempt to divorce him, if Ben Whitton possessed the power to frighten Jacob Brander into an unloverlike disappearance?

"I will have to go to San Francisco and see Ben Whitton," she decided, and wired him that she would be in this office at ten o'clock the following morning.

Whitton received her with the utmost courtesy and cheerfulness, and set a chair for her in a spot where the light fell full on her face. He sat down and gazed across his desk at her for several seconds. Then:

"Well, Mercedes, we have a momentous question up for consideration this morning. Thank you for obeying my mandate and presenting yourself for the inquisition."

"Make it as brief as possible," she urged defiantly.

"So you sneaked up to Reno to put one over on Julie, eh?"

"It was the simplest way, Ben. It saves a lot of fuss and bother and time and publicity. A divorce was inevitable. I should never have married Julie, poor dear."

"You refer to the time saved. Are you figuring on

marrying Jake Brander as soon as you divorce Julie in Reno?"

"That," she replied evenly, "is none of your business."

He shrugged. "Did you bring his letters with you, Mercedes?"

"No," she flared; "of course not."

"That was a slip. By now I imagine they are in the possession of my Reno representative. Not a difficult thing to gain access to an apartment and rifle a bureau drawer or a trunk. It's done in divorce cases every day. A ten-dollar bill slipped to the chambermaid, you know——"

"You wretch!"

"That gives you pause, doesn't it? Well, you will never be noted for your discretion, my dear. Why did you permit Brander to call upon you in Reno and spend the day with you—mostly at your apartment?"

He thought she was about to faint, and urged her brutally not to. When she had in a measure recovered he said:

"Of course, you know what Julie can do to Brander in the way of a suit for alienation of affections? I know, of course, that you never had any real affection for him which Jake Brander could alienate, but Julie doesn't! Hence, the outrage will be just as keen to him as if your action wasn't a divine intervention of Providence to insure that decent man a modicum of the happiness he is entitled to. Do you not realize that the bare threat of such a suit will send Jake to

Coventry? He'll just naturally remain out of the state to avoid service of the summons and complaint."

Ben threw back his leonine head and chuckled.

"Julie would never be so undignified as to sue him. I know Julie that well at least. He has too much pride."

"No? Well, you don't know what a man as poor as Julie will do for a hundred thousand dollars. Money changes the viewpoint—particularly when the victim has no defense. There would be no suit, but —there *might* be a private settlement. Jake's gun-shy when it comes to lawsuits, but a perfect sucker when it comes to settling them out of court. I wonder if he'll pay a hundred thousand dollars for you. It may occur to him that you aren't worth it—and then too he may not have the money to spare. I'm afraid he hasn't. He's been buying a lot of timber on the private tip you gave him and has had to borrow money."

"How dare you insinuate such a thing?"

"I haven't insinuated. I've affirmed." He opened his desk and drew out a map. "You secured a map of Oregon and traced on it the outlines of the timber areas you heard me speak to Julie about. That duplicate map was for your friend, Mr. Brander. Unfortunately you sent him the map I had left with Julie! My original map and your duplicate were made by different map makers! I'm a great hand to notice little things like that, so I was immediately suspicious and got on Brander's trail to see if he'd act on your information, which, by the way, you had no business to give him, because in so doing you betrayed one of

your husband's professional secrets and, I imagine, *that* is something he will not forgive."

She nodded acquiescence. Full well she knew Whitton knew whereof he spoke.

"You were in too great a hurry to get rid of Julie in order to marry Brander," he continued musingly. "Indecent haste. Of course, as I once assured you, I am entirely in favor of your divorcing Julie, because when you have passed out of his life I know where he will find happiness. But I dislike your callous way of going about it, my dear. Why did you attempt service by publication?"

"I didn't know where to find Julie, and I would have had to serve him in the state of Nevada if personal service was to be attained. Three months' service by publication in a weekly paper published in the county where suit is brought is legal."

"Provided you do not know where your husband is. But that is not true. You do know where he is."

"He is somewhere in the wooded wilderness of Oregon. My letters are addressed to him at this office."

"You made affidavit to that effect, of course. Theoretically you did not know where Julie was, but actually you did. You had means of ascertaining. So I'm afraid the judge will look askance at your suit when he learns the details. And I'm sure he will when I take the stand and—well, he'll realize you were trying to slip one over on your husband. I have a copy of your divorce complaint. It will stand up in Reno, feeble as it is, provided the charges of incompatibility

and mental cruelty are not combated. You have in your employ now a maid you formerly employed in Los Angeles. I suppose she'll be your corroborative witness?"

She saw she could not fence with the man, that it was far better to be direct with him. "How long have you known of my divorce action, Ben?" she queried.

"This office had news of it the day after it was filed."

"But you didn't tell Julie?"

"Not necessary. Time enough when he returns. Have you killed that notice in the *Argus*?"

"I have ordered its discontinuance."

"I'll know for certain when the next issue is printed. By the way, when you return to your Reno apartment you will find your letters from Jake still there. All I required was photostatic copies."

"You devil!"

"Keno!"

She recognized the allusion and flushed with mortification. "Well, what do you want me to do?" she quavered.

"Withdraw your suit and come home. Be back at that hotel where Julie left you when he went north, and be back there the day after to-morrow. Julie will be home in a week, and I want him to find you there upon his return."

She was more dangerously near hysterics now than she had ever been. "Oh, Ben," she pleaded, "for heaven's sake, don't interfere. I know my action will be a great shock to Julie, but he'll get over it. He

doesn't really love me any more than I love him. Our marriage has been a tragic, hopeless mess from the beginning, and you know it."

"If Jake Brander hadn't come into your life, would you have planned to divorce Julie just the same?"

She nodded.

"Sure?"

"Absolutely. We are hopelessly incompatible, Ben, and under such a condition I would prefer to make my own living to having him support me."

"Of course, you could do with all the alimony you could squeeze out of him," Whitton sneered. "This alimony thing is a frightful injustice. A woman will not make any decent, fair effort to promote happiness in her married life, yet, after casting her man aside she still clings to him and makes him support her—in idleness, if possible. I agree that in the case where divorce comes after long years of marriage and the wife is too old to support herself, or has lost the ability to or is not equipped to, ample alimony is just. But in the case of a young woman like yourself——"

"Oh, don't preach," she begged.

"The point is well taken. I have no right to preach. Forgive me. Well, one more question and I am through. Are you deluding yourself with the dream that you can possibly be happy with Jake Brander, that you, being his fourth wife, will be immune to the matrimonial failure that has distinguished his efforts to date? Do you think he is an intelligent man? An honorable man? An honorable man would not deliberately set about the seduction of another's wife, you know. Mercedes, I tell you, you're making a ter-

rible mistake. Your life with Julie may not be quite as happy as you desire, but I assure you life with Jake Brander will eventually prove a nightmare."

"Suppose you mind your own business, Ben!"

"My friend's happiness is some of my business, and I'll not have that fathead, Brander, and you triumph over him until—well, until I give the word. It is in my power to make the going hard and slippery for you both. Remember, you betrayed a professional secret of mine to him, and, in the circumstances under which you learned this secret, you were obliged, in honor, to regard it as your secret, too. He's a crooked dog, and if I can I'm going to tie a can to his tail."

"Must I remain and listen to this?"

"I suppose not. Mercedes, if you thought Julie would be a rich man in a few years, would that make any difference in your mental attitude toward him?"

"Julie will never be rich," she affirmed.

He saw that it was useless to attempt an argument, since she was one who would always argue abstractedly, always beg the question.

"It would make a difference, of course. There's nothing wrong with your happiness that a liberal allowance would not cure. But it wouldn't cure Julie's unhappiness. Mercedes, right now Julian Grannis is quite a rich man."

"How rich?" She was mildly interested.

"A trifle over half a million. Beyond the reach of the wolf of want. And when he perfects his ideas and makes them commercially practicable——"

"Julie can never be happy with me—and I want him to be happy, Ben."

"Will you not go back to him and make an honest, diligent effort to make him happy? Study him, Mercedes. Make a business of this married state, for really it is a matter that requires much study, much sacrifice, much understanding, much tolerance and much forgiveness. Go back to Julie and bear a few children for him——"

"He doesn't love me, Ben."

"He does love you. Not as much as he used to, I'll admit, but if you bear him a son he'll return to his ancient allegiance. He's a fine man, Mercedes, the salt of the earth. Gentle, just, brilliant, honored by brilliant men, humorous, patient, sympathetic, half a poet and a fighting bear cat when the fighting is good. I've seen that man's soul stripped to the buff. I know the ultimates of his nature. Don't hurt him—give him a square deal, Mercedes, and I'll be your friend—and, by Gad, I can be a good friend when I want to. You're not in love with Brander. You couldn't be. He's too gross. What you're after is his money, the opportunity for cornering that chimera you call a career. Fiddlesticks! There are wandering boy minstrels on the streets of Naples that can fiddle circles around you."

She shook her head. "You ask the impossible, Ben—and you're very rude."

"I didn't intend to make this plea when I summoned you here. I knew I'd be wasting my breath. But when you sit here before me, I see a beautiful woman

and, because I am a man, I forget my common sense and endow you with a heart; I tell myself I can reach that heart. Well, I've done my duty by my friend—and it's a duty I didn't want to perform. Forget it. Go back to Reno and follow through—all but the service by publication. I'm going north again in a few days, and when I return your husband will be with me. We'll return via Ogden and Reno. The train halts a few minutes in Reno, and I'll wire you the number of our train and the number of our car and drawing room. You can have your lawyer send his man there with the summons."

"Thank you. Will you furnish Julie with evidence to oppose the suit?"

"Not unless he decides positively to oppose it. I shall have nothing to say when the blow falls, but if he declares war on you I'll be his ally."

"I know Julie. I'll take a chance on him—and you."

"You'll regret it the longest day you live. Do you require any money?"

"Yes," she answered, flushing. "I could use about five hundred dollars."

"I'll mail you a check and spare you the dishonor of asking Brander for it. It will be Julie's money."

"Some of that mythical half million or so, I dare-say." Mercedes was at her ease now and could afford to be ironical.

He ignored the thrust. "I note from the copy of your complaint in action that you are asking for two hundred and fifty dollars a month alimony. I regard that as unfair. I'll not play ball with you unless you

withdraw that complaint and substitute one that makes no request for an alimony award. Of course, I don't think you'll ever try to collect alimony, because you plan to marry Brander the day after your decree is granted. His Paris divorce has been consummated, I hear. In asking alimony you were just being adroit enough to play safe. You've got to let the tail go with the hide, Mercedes, if you want my support."

"I'll accept the conditions," she agreed. "Although you have no real grounds to embroil Mr. Brander in this matter, I quite realize that a scandal can be built out of a mere suspicion, and I desire to avoid that. I ask only the right to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness and I have my own ideas as to what constitutes that."

He rose and bowed her to the door. "I'm glad you're Julie's friend," she said, as she departed. "You'll comfort him, won't you?"

He glared at her. "Trying to act noble, eh? Good-by, Mercedes—and good luck." As the door closed behind her Mr. Whitton addressed his brass cuspidor. "That woman," he said, "has the soul of a hyena, and I'm a rattle-brained, inconsistent, faithless jackass for attempting to argue with her. The kindest thing I can do for Julie is to let her follow through."

He pressed a call button, and Gloria Justin responded. "Send Mercedes Julie's check for five hundred dollars," he ordered. "It will gravel her to see your name signed to his check."

The girl smiled at him. "Took a good thrashing, didn't you, Ben?"

"Didn't have to. I voluntarily hauled down my

flag. I did my best by Julie, but the woman's impossible."

"In that event, doubtless you did your worst."

"I meant well. It's hard to give up my plan for putting a spoke in the Brander wheel, but I decided suddenly not to monkey with the machinery. There is a destiny which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, and I have an abiding faith that God will send a pestilence on that woman. Jerusalem, what an ego! She's made a plan, and because she made it she knows it's perfect."

"I could have told you you were wasting your time, Ben, by summoning her here, in an attempt to delay matters."

"Why didn't you?"

"You're the boss," Gloria answered, "and it's none of my business."

"Well, I'm in need of a woman's counsel, Gloria. Forget I'm the boss. Speak up."

"I counsel you to get the Grannis family out of your head and devote all of your attention to civil engineering. You're a poor hand at an intrigue. You're so honest you forget your rôle."

"Forgot it to-day, at any rate. You're right. All of this *is* none of my business, and why I make it my business the Lord only knows."

"I know, too," Gloria replied. "You're very obvious, Ben. Now get down to work and forget the entire matter."

En route back to his camp in the upper Columbia River basin, Ben Whitton stopped in Portland long enough to report to Gruber of the O. R. N. for the

purpose of going over with the latter the report he had submitted and explaining certain details of it. Gruber met him with a wry smile.

"Whitton," he announced, "somebody leaked on this deal."

Whitton raised his eyebrows interrogatively. Gruber went on: "Jake Brander of the Brander Timber Company got early news of our plan to build into that timber and grabbed up the Hale-Robinson and Banning holdings. Now every lumber manufacturer in Oregon knows what we're up to, and there's hell to pay and no pitch hot."

"Elucidate," Whitton urged, and sat down to listen.

"The Oregon and Washington sawmill men have an organization they call the Northwestern Fir Association, and they've sent their executive committee to call upon me with an ultimatum. It seems they have the low-down on Jake Brander's deal. They know what his own timber has cost him and what he's paid for the timber he's bought. They inform me that, because of the extremely low cost of his stumpage he will be enabled to manufacture lumber far cheaper than any of them; hence he will be enabled to cut the price of lumber a dollar or two below their lowest price and make money while they are, at present, losing money. It seems, too, they are convinced this is exactly the game he will play. His old man was always a cutthroat competitor, and until Jake got rid of the sawmills his father left him he was always a disturbing element in the market."

"So I've heard, Mr. Gruber."

"The result," Gruber continued, "is a bad situation

for all concerned. The market on Douglas fir lumber is, and for the past three years has been, in the Bad Lands. Any number of mills have gone broke, and the survivors are firmly convinced that the cause for the present unhappy market condition is due to a vast overproduction. Hence the prospect of having the Brander Timber Company add a million and a half feet per day to that overproduction before the market may reasonably be suspected of adjusting itself has the Northwestern Fir Association members running around in circles. They are not so much concerned with this additional overproduction, however, as they are with the fact that Brander will be a price cutter, because he can make money that way, and, as a matter of fact, *will* have to be a price cutter in order to move his huge production to market."

"Is old man Robinson, by any chance, a member of that executive committee?"

Gruber smiled. "Right the very first time, Whitton. So is Banning."

"But those two pirates are the ones who have made this condition possible, Mr. Gruber."

Gruber nodded. "Can you blame them? They saw an opportunity to unload on Brander at a profit—and now they're scheming to get their timber back, and his with it for—well, I should say the price of the bonded indebtedness."

"You credit them with too much philanthropy, Mr. Gruber. If those properties ever fall into the hands of a bondholders' protective committee, which they will do the first time Brander defaults on his interest, old Robinson and his fellow conspirator, Banning, will

buy them back for fifty cents on the dollar, and the bondholders will kiss them for doing it. I take it that the O. R. N. has changed its mind about building that branch line."

"Not exactly, Whitton. We've spent a little money for reconnaissance and some more to build camps and freight in supplies and material, preparatory to going through with our plan, and we do not like the idea of being coerced into abandoning a legitimate project. We may have to, however. The decision is up to the Chicago office."

"What's the ultimatum?"

"It's more than an ultimatum, Whitton. It's also a condition, and the condition, more than the ultimatum, may force us to accede. The O. R. N.'s principal freight business is lumber, and if our action in making it possible for Jake Brander to raise hell with the market disrupts the lumber trade in this territory, we, as common carriers, may greatly reduce our earnings. Three big sawmills furnishing us daily freight from the upper Columbia River basin will not offset a couple of dozen big sawmills that may shut down elsewhere. We're between the devil and the deep sea, and I don't like it."

"Well, that's the condition, and I agree with you, Mr. Gruber, that it is an unhealthy one."

"We didn't foresee it. Our plans were made in good faith."

"Well, being railroad men, you neglected to study lumber market conditions. But the sawmill men study them, you bet, and are quick to swat any obstacle that raises its head. What's the ultimatum?"

"If we persist in building that branch line into Brander's timber, the Northwestern Fir Association members threaten to boycott our road. We've been giving them good service, we've had more cars than our competitors who operate in the great wheat districts of the Middle West, and hence have to divert annually a large number of cars from the Pacific Coast lumber trade to handle wheat. So we've been getting just a little more than our share of the traffic in this territory. The lumbermen say that if they play our game it is up to us to play theirs, and that if we do not, they will divert their business to the N. P. and the St. P. & M. and never ship a car of lumber over our tracks if it is possible to avoid it."

The two men sat looking at each other, and around Ben Whitton's aggressive mouth a thin little smile was breaking. "You're licked," he said presently.

Gruber sighed. "I'm afraid we are. Still, I'm not going to pocket, without a struggle, the loss we've been put to when, in good faith, we engaged your firm to make surveys and reports, commenced the erection of our camps, etc."

"Perhaps you can get the members of the Northwestern Fir Association to absorb fifty per cent of that loss," Whitton suggested. "They'll play you fair, I think, if you play them fair."

"What about Brander? Unless we build, he's ruined."

"Oh, well," Whitton replied carelessly, "he's just the innocent bystander. He's been gambling on some inside information, and a gambler expects to take a loss occasionally."

"By Judas, he can't stand up under this one. It seems these belligerent competitors of his have looked him over pretty carefully. He'd had to dig and scrape pretty hard to pay for that timber, and he has only bonded a portion of his holdings as yet. He could borrow money from banks cheaper than he could get it on his bonds, but he has a contract with a big New York bond house to purchase such additional bonds as he will be required to float to commence his operations and provide working capital. All he requires to make a monumental clean-up is our branch line built in to his timber. And if the poor devil doesn't get it, he'll be stuck with a frozen asset on which he will be paying enough interest annually to bankrupt him in five years."

"He'll not pay it. He'll default and let the bondholders foreclose," Whitton answered.

"But they'll sue him and get a deficiency judgment against him."

"They can get only a deficiency judgment against the Brander Timber Company, a corporation. Jake's private fortune will be safe, unless, indeed, the bond issue is subject to interpretation under the laws of a state that recognizes stockholders' liability, in which event the bondholders will go after Jake, as the sole stockholder of the Brander Timber Corporation."

"He's probably been foxy enough to avoid that. But if this timber project goes fluey he'll be hard put to it to repay the mortgages on his private property and carry on with his other enterprises. Looks as if he might come a cropper."

"It's sad," Ben Whitton murmured—"very sad."

"Well, the situation makes me squirm, Whitton. We don't want to go back on Brander. He accepted in good faith our word that we were going to build, and if we go back on that assurance he will be ruined."

"On the other hand," Whitton reminded Gruber, "if you do not go back on your assurance, these Northwestern Fir fellows may ruin the O. R. N. They can certainly cut your annual earnings fifty per cent, which will depreciate your stock and raise the devil generally. A boycott like that, if continued long enough, might put the O. R. N. into the hands of a receiver."

Gruber sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. I feel sorry for Brander. I fear he's going to be squeezed, but before we do anything radical I'll take him into our confidence and try to rig up a deal whereby he can unload his timber holdings to somebody who wants to hold them for an investment. Twenty years from now all the kings' horses and all the king's men will not keep us or one of our competitors from building that branch line."

"Not much chance of his unloading now," Ben prophesied. "The lumbermen of the Northwest know his situation; none of them would care to tie up a few million dollars for twenty years. It is too easy to eliminate Brander; and when he is eliminated Messrs. Robinson and Banning will get together and do business with the bondholders so much cheaper——"

"Damnation!" Gruber interrupted. "This thing hurts."

"You'll put up a fight, of course."

"Naturally—for the sake of our self-respect. But I've halted work on our camps until the Chicago office

makes its decision. Of course, we'll put up a fight. Got to try to make those recalcitrant fir people absorb all or half of our loss to date."

"Meantime," Whitton suggested, "it would be bad business to have news of this action creep out."

"Business situations like this one never become public property. Come to think it over, it would never do to give Brander the real excuse for double-crossing him. He might allege conspiracy and sue us and the Northwestern Fir Association, and I wouldn't be surprised if he got a judgment in the federal court."

"Well, I'm here to go over my report with you," Ben suggested, glad of an opportunity to change the subject.

"What's the use?" Gruber sighed. "I'll file it away. It will, doubtless, be as good a report a quarter of a century from now as it is to-day. If you and Grannis will send in your bills, I'll audit them and get your check to you promptly. If we conclude to defy that ultimatum I'll send for you to supervise the building of our line. Good day."

Ben Whitton returned to his hotel and in the privacy of his room did a great deal of thinking.

That Jacob Brander's corporation, the Brander Timber Company, would be ruined he had no doubt; that Jacob Brander's personal fortune might be swept away in the eddies of that financial flood was possible. At any rate, for the future, money would mean something to Jacob Brander, even if he survived bankruptcy.

"Yes," he soliloquized, "God sends pestilences to the unworthy. I told Mercedes Julie was rich—and

she wouldn't believe me because I didn't go into detail. She didn't even ask for detail, because she knew Brander was many times richer. I have honestly tried to save her—and she'll not be saved. And it was a mistake on my part to attempt to hold her to her husband. No more mistakes like that. Please God, now, she'll divorce Julie within a week, marry Brander—and sit calmly down to await the cataclysm. She's tried poverty with a man who was accustomed to it. Now let her try it with a man who has never tried it—and see how well he stands up under the bludgeoning of fate. Now we'll see which of these two men can meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two impostors both the same. Mercedes, Mercedes, what have you done? What are you going to say when Brander turns on you and brands you as the author of his ruin?"

Ben considered this picture a little while and then found the answer. "She'll have hysterics, of course," he declared.

He pondered the situation further. There was no doubt in his mind that Mercedes Grannis had made up her mind to divorce her husband. For the present, the fears Ben had engendered in her might prevent her from moving into action, but Ben knew her for a resolute woman who was playing for high stakes, and in the end she would have her way. He realized she was not a very intelligent woman, but she was cunning. Ben decided that immediately upon her husband's return she would commence a course of action calculated to drive Julie to desperation, to kill whatever love he had for her, to break down his abhorrence

of divorce and cause him to attain, eventually, to the conclusion that any course that relieved him of an intolerable unhappiness was justifiable and to be embraced.

Then Mercedes would strike. She would inform her husband, quite calmly and with a wealth of regret, evidenced by copious tears, that their marriage had been a horrible mistake, and ask him for her freedom. And Ben knew that when she did this, Julie, regardless of his own feelings, would grant her request, whereupon she would proceed immediately to Reno, file a new complaint and be free at the expiration of ninety days. Yes, undoubtedly she would reside another ninety days in Nevada, trusting to Ben Whitton not to reveal to Julie the facts of her previous residence during his absence.

Meanwhile Jake Brander would go to Europe or New York, in order to set up a workable alibi in the event of a suit for alienation of affections filed against him by Julie.

"But she knows Julie would never file such a suit," Ben reflected. "That threat of mine didn't work. She knows the man too well. Why, then, should I continue to block her aspirations? I'll permit her to play out her hand and trump all her own aces and Jake Brander's. Of course, Julie will be terribly shocked, but, then, will not the shock of her callous action be an unmixed blessing in the long run? Gloria rather took him off his feet that night at my house, but—well, he's got a grip on himself since and will not permit himself to indulge in daydreams hereafter—that is, while he's married. Honorable old hunks, Julie.

Very virtuous and old-fashioned in his attitude toward the marriage vow."

If Mercedes would only play the game with him, he'd forget Gloria again and be fairly happy in his spiritual isolation. Right now he's fighting tooth and toenail for his happiness—and his wife's. He regards it as a duty to do this, and until he realizes fully that his wife is just a rag and a bone and a hank of hair he'll keep on fighting. He'll pet her, toady to her, give her her way, put up with her arrogance and selfishness miles beyond the point where any other man would revolt and desert his wife in the fond hope that, at the expiration of a year of desertion, she would divorce him. No doubt about it.

"Julie would have made a splendid martyr. But if Mercedes makes the first move without consulting him a miracle may happen. His love—and he's still in love with her—may backfire and change to hate overnight. And that will be a comfort to him, give him courage to buck up, endow him with a clear perception of the utter foolishness of attempting to carry on. . . . Yes, Julie, my friend, I must put the skids under you, because I know what's good for you and, after all, this entire situation is not of my creation."

He wrote a telegram to Mercedes, as follows:

I made a great mistake in attempting to regulate your marital affairs Stop Trust you will forgive me Stop Have concluded situation is impossible and withdraw my opposition Stop You have my word that none of the inside information I possess will ever be used against you Stop Suggest you return to Reno immediately and file a new suit but omitting alimony

Stop Within week will be returning to San Francisco via Ogden and Reno with Julie Stop Will wire you at your Reno address giving you car number and drawing-room of train on which we arrive Reno Stop Your attorneys can then have their man board train and serve Julie while he is in Nevada and after that the situation will be in your hands and I will help you all I can Stop Wire me Benson Hotel here your plans so we can coöperate. BEN.

He considered this message a little while, and then tore it up. "It would be like Mercedes," he decided, "to show Julie that telegram after the smoke had cleared away; she'd love to make a rift in our friendship. The telephone is safer. It leaves no trace."

Forthwith he called Mercedes in San Francisco and was fortunate enough to find her in. Having announced his identity, without a moment's pause he repeated, with slight variations, the contents of the telegram and then waited for her answer.

"Thank you, Ben," she replied sweetly. "I thought you'd come to the conclusion, eventually, that you cannot order Julie's life and mine. I'll return to Reno in the morning and will be at the same address. My rent was paid in advance, and I did not notify my landlady that I would not return. I'll withdraw the plea for alimony, provided you do as you have promised."

"Sold," Ben answered, and hung up.

CHAPTER XII

Two days later Ben Whitton rejoined Julian Grannis in the latter's camp, bringing with him a large-scale map of the Columbia River basin, with townships and sections indicated on it. From the field notes of his crew, he inked in on this map the territory comprising the watershed they had surveyed under Julie's direction; then compared the townships, sections and subsections with the legal description of the timber holdings Jacob Brander had recently purchased. Julie watched him interestedly.

"Who owns the land, Ben?" he queried when the latter had completed his comparisons.

"This entire watershed, the dam site and the power-station sites are all owned by the Brander Timber Company, and have been owned by that company for more than twenty years."

"So, in the event that this potential power development should ever become available, those desiring to acquire this watershed would have to deal with Jacob Brander, eh?"

Ben nodded, and by his silence he knew that his friend did not regard the prospect with enthusiasm. "Well, at any rate," he finally said, "if the subject should in years to come develop a particular interest for us, we'll not have to investigate it. We'll have all of our data before us and be able to act quickly

and intelligently. And it hasn't cost much to acquire the information. Just a wild gamble, that's all."

"Well, my boys appear to have completed their job, Julie. I think we can rely on their figures, although I'll check them myself to make certain. How about your end of this rainbow?"

"All set, Ben. I've measured the flow in the main stream and all of its tributaries, and at this season of the year those measurements may be regarded as indicating the normal flow. Of course the flood waters, in time of freshet, are dependent upon the rainfall and the snowfall in the mountains off there to the east, where the main stream has its source. I can secure these data from the government, which has kept a meteorological record for more than fifty years; hence it will be easy to arrive at an average. There will be no dry years. Even up here there has never been a season of drought, so far as I can learn."

"Well, then, Julie, nothing remains for us to do save break camp, go home and await further orders from the O. R. N. and the timber people for whose benefit the railroad engaged you. You and I will leave tomorrow and leave to our crews the job of packing up and pulling out. We'll ride to the camp the railroad people are already establishing, catch a train there, and go home via Ogden and Reno, to save returning to Portland and taking the Southern Pacific south."

At Ogden, Ben Whitton sent a telegram to Mercedes, giving her the train number, the letter of their drawing-room and the time of arrival in Reno. He did not sign this telegram, but that it had been received and understood he felt quite assured when, a minute

after the train pulled into Reno, their drawing-room door opened and a man looked in.

"Which of you gentlemen," he inquired unctuously, "is Mr. Julian Grannis of San Francisco?"

"I am," Julie replied promptly.

"You are the husband of one Mercedes Grannis?"

"Yes. What's happened? Has she been hurt?"

"I think not, Mr. Grannis. Here—take this"—and he thrust into Julie's hand a document with a pale-blue legal backing. Instantly he retreated, closing the door behind him, and Julie, mildly amazed, glanced at the stranger's strange gift. First he read the backing on it, then opened it with hands that trembled a little and read the two-page typescript through. As calmly as if the document were one of no importance, he folded it, tucked it in the inner breast pocket of his coat and looked out the window. He was very pale, and Ben saw that tears were struggling to creep beneath his eyelids. The train had started again before he spoke, without looking at his friend.

"Can you guess what that document was, Ben?" he queried in a faint, strained voice.

"A fool could do that, old son." Ben was resolved to be cheerful. "That man served you with a summons in a lawsuit, did he not?"

"Mercedes is suing me for a divorce in Reno, Ben."

He removed the summons from his pocket and handed it to Ben.

"It was cruel of her," said Julie, "to do it this way. If she had only told me she couldn't be happy with me, I'd have helped her."

He closed his eyes to keep back the tears of shame and mortification and anguish.

"When women pull off a job like this," said Ben Whitton, "it's a sign they have already made complete arrangements to marry someone else."

"Such things are done!" Julie murmured faintly. "I suppose in this case it's Jake Brander."

"I have a hunch Jake's the bully boy with the crockery eye, old son."

"She was riding with him that day in the park when he crashed into your car, Ben. I recognized her the minute we came together, but pretended not to. Realized you were trying to protect her—damned decent of you, Ben. Couldn't admit it before, you know, but it's never too late to acknowledge a debt. I think I ought to kill Brander, Ben."

"Why?"

"Because he has ruined my happiness."

"Rats! Mercedes never loved you any more than she loves him. It's money she's after. Her heart is as cold as a polar bear's tail, and you know it. You must have known it when she came in on us at the hotel, following the incident in the park, and lied to you like a lady."

"She didn't lie to me," Julie defended stoutly. "She just pretended ignorance. And I didn't say anything to her about it because I feared she might fib to me if I did, although if she had done so I would have forgiven her. Some lies are justified on the ground of self-defense."

"What an old fox you are!"

"What an old fox *you* are! You took my job off my hands and gave Jake Brander the raus; you spared Mercedes and me a terrible scene and you let Mrs. Brander down easy. I was so grateful to you that day I wanted to hug you, but the devil of it was I had to play the fool. And I do not relish doing that, because I am not a fool—not usually." He sighed. "Well, Jake Brander couldn't be bluffed, could he?"

"No, but he can be swindled—and I've swindled him. I've fixed his clock—and, incidentally, I've fixed Mercedes' clock, too."

"Why, my friend?"

"It's such fun to catch a pair of smart Alecks out on the end of a limb and then saw the limb off on them."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch and wait, Julie!"

"You knew she was living in Reno, of course; that she was establishing a residence there in order to sue me."

"Yes, I did," Whitton admitted.

"And you brought me home via this route in order that she might catch me in Reno and have me served legally with the summons and complaint?"

"I did. I concluded it would be a kindness to put you out of your misery as expeditiously as possible. I'd do the same for a yellow dog that had been run over by an automobile."

"I had an idea you were up to some funny business."

"Are you going to fight that divorce action?" Ben queried very quietly.

"I think I ought to, Ben. She can't win if I oppose

her seriously, and I ought to oppose her as a plain matter of charity. It's my duty to save her from Jake Brander."

"Listen, you ass! When she gets tired of Jake Brander, she'll have no difficulty getting rid of him, and he'll pay her well for the favor. You owe Brander a poke. In fact, I agree with you that you ought to kill him if that act did not entail melancholy consequences and if Mercedes was half worth it. Therefore let him marry Mercedes! At the risk of insulting you, I'm here to tell you she isn't worth one of your hangnails. She's made a little plan calculated to relieve her of the genteel poverty she has been accustomed to with you——"

"I should have told her about Uncle Jarlath, Butch. I'll tell her now——"

"You monumental idealist! You gibbering jackdaw! You—you silly baboon! She might come back to you!"

"Well, isn't that where she belongs?"

"Certainly—if you want second-hand or shopworn goods. Julie, I've had shadows on her too, and I think mine did a better job than yours. I got them on it first."

"I don't believe you."

"Good news. Julie, the next station is Verdi. Let's hop off, hire an automobile and motor back to Reno for a conference with Mercedes. You tell her all about Uncle Jarlath's legacy and promise to abandon your dream of an experimental workshop to discover the secret of the long-distance, high-tension transmission, without appreciable loss in transit of hydroelectric

energy, and if she agrees to dismiss her suit and return to you, you'll know instantly that she still loves you a little. If, on the other hand, she rejects your offer, you'll know she's just a high-class gold digger and you will then have no objection to giving the gal a chance to make good by marrying the moron Brander."

But Julie only stared at him, and in his eyes Ben Whitton read the answer. Julie lacked the courage. He who planned to play with synthetic thunderbolts quailed before his experiment in marital surgery.

"You lose," Whitton cried triumphantly. "But, losing, you win. Let the tail go with the hide. You've played a man's game. Be a gentleman to the last and do not oppose the lady's wishes. You'd but demean yourself. All of your married life you've been a human doormat. You know you've done a lot of serious thinking up there in the tall timber, and knowing you I know you cannot think without coming to definite conclusions. And I know at least one conclusion you have arrived at."

"Name it, Ben."

"That you have a natural, normal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness if in that pursuit you do not detract from the same right of another; that you have never been in love, but on the contrary you have been the victim of an infatuation, of clever manhandling by a clever manhandler. You have been in love with love—the victim of your incorrigible idealism, your amazing sympathy and understanding, your pity and your chivalry, and it's time to snap out of it. Right?"

"Right."

Ben interrupted a silence with: "Julie, do you feel pretty strong, in spite of everything?"

"I can stand anything, Butch. Fire away."

"Well, then, it becomes my sad duty to inform you that you can put behind you your cherished dream of monkeying with the thunderbolts, unless, of course, you just naturally care to see three million-odd volts leap across a twenty-foot space. Somebody has beat you to the punch, old son. A man named Baum, down in San Francisco, has just been granted a patent on a method for the high-tension, long-distance transportation, without loss, of hydroelectric energy. I read about it in the local papers when I was in San Francisco last week, and looked into the matter. He's solved it, Julie. At least two of the big bugs of your honorable profession assure me he has and that there is no doubt that he can handle four hundred and forty thousand volts and transport it at least five hundred miles."

Julie showed not the slightest trace of disappointment, chagrin or envy. "Bully for old Baum! Good man, Baum. He would be the one to solve it. He was in my class at college, Butch. He knows his onions. You bet he does, and I rejoice in his success. Must call on him as soon as we arrive and congratulate him. He'll tell me all about it, of course. You say he can handle four hundred and forty thousand volts?"

Ben nodded, and Julie smiled. "There's always room at the top, Butch, and Baum has only started. I'll try to finish. I'll race Baum to the secret of delivering eight hundred and eighty thousand volts. But we'll not stop there. We must go on and on, doubling

and redoubling. I rejoice in his success, but we can't be content with a modest victory, so I'll *not* put my bright daydream behind me. Baum has merely made it easier for me. More power to his elbow!"

"Julie, you're a scientist, of course, and I can understand your scientific joy, but I'm only a plain civil and mechanical engineer, and where you seek naught but the advancement of mankind I seek a profit, in order that, in the afternoon of life, I may not hear the well-known wolf howling around my domicile.

"I forbid you to blow in that five hundred thousand dollar reserve of yours on a workshop—yet. We'll need the money to acquire that watershed, dam site and those power sites from Jake Brander. When we have acquired them, Baum's discovery will enable us to deliver quite a load of cheap juice to the bridgeheads of market. Why, Julie, you dreamer, we aren't three hundred miles from Seattle or Tacoma with our proposed plants, and think of all the markets in between and north and south and east."

"We haven't enough money for the complete operation, Butch. We'll have to call in help."

"Well, can't you call it? I can, if you cannot."

"I think so," Julie murmured thoughtfully. "Yes, I'm quite certain of it, provided Baum's patent works out in practice. The president of the Electric Bond & Share Corporation once told me that if I ever stumbled across a good, sound hydroelectric proposition that would stand the most rigid investigation, his people would take it over and cut me in on a healthy interest."

"Those people can do anything they plan to do, Julie. Old son, you've started me to dreaming dreams

too. Well, I can build the dam and the power houses, and, if it comes to a pinch, maybe I can get the land and water rather cheap. We might organize a corporation and float a bond issue—more ways than one of skinning a cat, you know."

Despite his valiant efforts to carry off his domestic tragedy manfully, Julie was crawling inwardly at the death of his love. Ben noticed that he seemed to be depressed and decided that what he needed was a whole lot of letting alone. So he went up into the club car and remained there all day. He sent the porter to Julie to ask the latter if he cared to join him at dinner, but, receiving an answer in the negative, dined in gloomy solitude and at ten o'clock returned to the drawing-room. Julie was in the upper berth and did not speak, so Ben undressed in the dark. For a couple of hours before sleep claimed him, he could hear his friend tossing and turning in the berth above him.

When he awakened in the morning, silence reigned in the berth above and a note was pinned to the seat of his capacious trousers hung on a hook across the drawing-room. Ben reached for it. It was a note from Julie and read:

Left train at Sacramento and will fly back to Reno. Know you will not respect me for this, but I owe it to Mercy to save her from that fellow. At least, I'll feel better after having tried.

Mr. Whitton tore this note into tiny pieces and climbed back into his berth.

"No," he murmured to the electric fan, "and neither would I kill a man who was contemplating suicide.

Ah, Gloria, Gloria, we don't seem to have much luck these days, do we, you poor girl?"

The heart of Julian Grannis beat wildly as he rang the bell of his wife's apartment in Reno and waited for her to open the door. When she did she attempted to close it instantly, but his foot was in the aperture before she could do so.

"I'll not be troublesome, my dear," he assured her. "Don't be afraid of me. Got to have one small confab and then I'm through forever."

Reluctantly she permitted him to enter and immediately commenced to weep. Julie found himself a chair, sat down and waited for her to subside.

"Why have you come, Julie?" she sobbed presently. "Why do you make it so hard for me?"

"I have to know things, Mercy. You—you gave me a poke when I wasn't looking, and I didn't expect it. Naturally you jolted me. After thinking it over, I had a desire to discuss the matter with you, to ascertain, if possible, wherein I have failed as a husband——"

"You haven't failed, Julie. You've been the best and finest husband any woman could ever have. It is I who have failed."

He gulped. "Mind telling me why?"

"Our marriage was a mistake, Julie."

"You've ceased to love me."

She nodded. "You don't understand me, and you never will, Julie. I'm horribly lonely and depressed; I wasn't born for the sort of life the wife of an electrical engineer must live."

"I see. Too much poverty. Well, I'll admit it's

been a handicap. How much money would you require to surmount that knotty handicap?"

"Far more than you could ever afford, Julie."

"Well, I have $600,000. My Uncle Jarlath left it to me. Didn't tell you about it for reasons best known to myself, but now—what with that and my new association with Ben Whitton—it would seem that, all other things being equal, we might be reasonably happy on this new financial basis."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Had another plan I wanted to put through first. Didn't want you to revise it for me. I feared you would."

"That's always been the trouble," she flared angrily, happy now that she had developed a casus belli. "You've never taken me into your confidence, never——"

"That," he interrupted, "is not the truth. The matter of Uncle Jarlath's legacy is the only matter in our partnership that I have ever concealed from you. And—I have been faithful."

"How am I to prove that?"

"You can't. You've just got to take it for granted, my dear."

She was silent for a minute. "Well, it's too late now," she concluded finally.

"You can't get away with this thing if I fight it," he reminded her. She flinched. He went on tonelessly, "You didn't ask for alimony. Well, that doesn't matter. I'll pay it, anyhow, and I'll—I'll pay your lawyer's fee, if it isn't too much. No gouging."

"It will be nominal. Are you going to oppose me, Julie?"

"No. I've done my duty by you. Seems a bald, melodramatic, commonplace statement to make, but I can't think of any other line to fit the situation to-day. I've staked my little bankroll against Jake Brander's, and I've lost. However, I thought I ought to come to see you and explain the situation. It seemed the decent thing to do to try to save you from the consequences of your folly. Brander's a rotter, Mercedes. You'll be thoroughly unhappy with him."

"You appear to be armed with a lot of inside information which isn't true," she retorted witheringly. "I see you've been talking to Ben Whitton."

"Yes, but I knew all about it before I talked with him. I've had you shadowed for quite a while. I've had Brander shadowed from the day I thrashed him in the park. Yes, I saw you and recognized you that day, but I loved you, old girl, so I pretended otherwise. I didn't want to hurt you. . . . I've been concerned entirely with saving you, with making you happy."

She looked at this man she had never, even remotely, known, and a wave of shame and humiliation swept over her. His tired, tragic eyes bored into her, and for the first time she realized that in Julie Grannis she was casting away a Man.

"Why do you do this?" she half whispered. "I—I don't understand. I can't imagine a man wanting his wife back after——"

"I don't want you back. No, not now," he interrupted without rancor. "I had to give you your chance, and if you had accepted it I would have made

good. It's too late to discuss a reconciliation now. You aren't worth it. I know you now—and I never knew you before.

"Ben was right. It's money you're after, and you don't love Brander an iota more than you love me. So take him, with my blessing, but remember you're making a grave tactical error. After a man has lived, in comparative felicity, with a woman for a few years he finds it very difficult to face the fact that she is capable of doing what you have done. You could have got rid of me for the asking, you know. I've never denied you anything that was in my power to give; my sole concern has been your happiness and I've failed miserably on the job."

He stood up and held out his hand. "I'm going now, because if I remain you'll have hysterics—and this time they'll be real. Good-by, Mercedes, and good luck to you. When the luck changes—as it's bound to—remember that once you were my wife and that I loved you. You'll always be my responsibility—and I'm damned if I quite know why! I suppose it's because I, better than any other human being, realize your helplessness and have imagination enough to see your finish."

He tried to possess himself of her hand, but she placed both her hands behind her, so he patted her sleek black head very gently, picked up his hat and walked out. He went to a hotel and waited until the mail plane came in from the East, when he purchased a passage for himself and returned to San Francisco.

It was a week before he came down to the office. Ben Whitton looked up grimly as his friend settled

into the visitor's chair. "Well," Whitton queried, "how do you like flying?"

"Great. I flew back, too."

"Mercedes come with you?"

"No."

"I've wired in your name and canceled the order for all that equipment you wanted for your workshop. And I have a man who wants to lease your workshop for a garage for his trucks. The price is quite good, and here is the lease. Sign on the dotted line."

Mechanically Julie signed.

"And here," Whitton went on, "is a revocation of that trust you made for Mercedes and yourself. You'll not need it now, and Gloria will clip your coupons and cash them for you and never bother you about it. So why pay a bank to do it for you? Sign!"

Julie signed.

"Now, what do you want to do, old son?"

"I think I'd like to go fishing—with you, Butch."

"When?"

"Immediately."

"Strange," Ben Whitton murmured, "how our minds always run in the same channel!" He pointed to a couple of suitcases, an old duffle bag and a leather case for fishing rods over in a corner. "I have all the tackle you'll need, and as for fishing clothes you can buy them in Los Angeles. I hear the tuna are running off the Channel Islands, and as my car is downstairs let's go."

"As soon as I've sent a check to Mercedes."

"I gave her $500 of your money more than two weeks ago. Gloria signed the check."

Together they went downstairs, and Ben noticed that Julie did not bother to say farewell to Gloria Justin. For a moment he almost hated him for it. "Hope this isn't going to make a misanthrope of you, Julie," he announced as they climbed into his car. "Burnt child dreading the fire and all that sort of jolly rot, you know."

"I'll never trust another woman as long as I live," Julie declared vehemently.

"You're a liar," said Mr. Whitton, without passion.

Two days later, at their hotel on Santa Catalina Island, Ben, looking through the list of notices of intent to marry, which the morning paper provided, noted that Jacob Brander and Mercedes Grannis had applied to the marriage license bureau of the county of Los Angeles for a marriage license. Under the California law a marriage license may not issue until after three days' notice of intent to marry, and for those three days Ben Whitton dwelt in an agony of apprehension lest at the last moment something might arise to thwart his malevolent desires. On the fourth morning, however, the Los Angeles papers carried a story of the marriage, Jacob Brander being one who loomed sufficiently large, socially and financially, to warrant this publicity.

Ben went at once to the telephone and called up Brander's home in Pasadena. The butler, answering, informed him that Mr. and Mrs. Brander had departed on their honeymoon for Europe, and some adroit questioning elicited the name of the steamer on which they had booked passage; also the sailing date. After making a memorandum of this, Mr. Whitton

returned to his tuna fishing with more zest than formerly. But he fished alone that day. Julie decided to remain at the hotel to finish a novel he was reading, so Mr. Whitton realized that Julie too had read the paper that morning and required once more a great deal of letting alone.

That night, when he rejoined his friend, Julie said: "Butch, I'm tired of fishing. I want to get to work, and as a preliminary I'm going abroad immediately. There's a chap—Dr. Nisander, of the University of Upsala, in Sweden, whose research work on lightning has been most remarkable. I want to visit him and exchange notes."

"When will you return?"

"I don't know."

For some reason, quite unfathomable to Julian Grannis, Ben Whitton's face assumed instantly an expression not unremotely like that of a temperamental bulldog. "You may go to the devil, if you care to," he growled. "It will be a relief to me not to have to baby you any longer. If you had a grain of common sense, of gratitude, of decency, you'd ask Gloria Justin to marry you and take her with you."

"Since that," Julie replied coldly, "is none of your business, I must ask you not to discuss it with me. I'm more than nine years old."

"Oh, but I will discuss it with you, whether you relish it or not. Gloria loved you once, and you were head over heels in love with her. Then you met Mercedes. My private opinion is that Gloria still loves you."

"And my private opinion," Julie roared back, "is

that you're in love with her yourself and always have been. I'm not the unthinking, unseeing idiot you assume me to be, and I'm utterly wearied of being babied. I'm free, I tell you. I can roll my own hoop. I'll not be interfered with. You go ask Gloria to marry you, Butch. She'll accept you. She'd be crazy if she didn't."

Mr. Whitton shook his picnic ham of a fist under Julie's nose. "Since that," he half shouted, "is none of your business, I must ask you not to discuss it with me. *I'm* more than nine years old. I'm free, too, and I intend to retain my freedom; fifty per cent of my male friends who have married have been divorced or are in process of being divorced and the other fifty per cent wish they had the courage to quit. That's warning enough for me. I'm not the marrying type. Domesticity would ruin me. But you *are* the marrying type, and a lack of domesticity will make a stray cat of you. You go over to Europe, wandering around on the loose, and some Swedish servant girl will land you out in the grass. You shouldn't be allowed out alone."

"Butch, Butch," Julie pleaded, "we are quarreling."

"You bet we're quarreling. Any time I roll the crust for a pie for you, you'll eat it, monkey."

"Why, I hadn't the slightest idea you took such a personal interest in my happiness, Butch!"

"I don't. I don't care what happens to you. I'm thinking of Gloria and her happiness, of her future."

"Ah," Julie murmured, "I knew I was right. Now, then, Butch, you listen to me. If you are hanged by the neck until I propose to Gloria Justin, you'll be

excessively ripe when the coroner cuts you down. I'm incapable of loving any woman again. . . . My sense of decency would prevent my offering that fine girl the empty husk of a man. And, moreover, for me to dash off and get married again, merely because Mercedes has done it would be—well, indecent."

Ben was truly enraged. He commenced throwing his arms around like a giant windmill; he swore horribly. "I did all I could to conserve your married happiness until I discovered there was no happiness to conserve," he almost shouted, "and then I commenced promoting a substitute. And now I find I have wasted all my sweetness on a puling infant, an old-fashioned drooling piece of fromage, a sticky sentimentalist where I had hoped to find a wise idealist—now, now, Julie, my dear friend, you know I never intended to hurt your feelings. You know, I wouldn't do that on a bet."

There were big bright tears in Julie's eyes; his mouth was quivering; his emotion was about to overcome him. "Oh, buck up, old son, buck up," Whitton pleaded, and put his great arm around Julie's thin shoulders. "Never mind about me. I'm a big, strong man and Father fed me meat at an inconceivably tender age. But you want looking after. You've got to have a trainer, a woman who understands you, a wife to shove you gently along toward your destiny, to enthuse with you and over you, to sympathize with you, to be patient and realize, when that meteor of a brain of yours starts across unknown worlds, that she may not follow, but must sit patiently and wait your return. You've got to have some children—some

girls to dandle on your knees and some boys to go fishing with. Never mind me, old comrade. I'll be—content—as—hell just to be Uncle Ben. That's my job. Uncle Ben, the friend of the family. I'll get a real thrill out of getting down on my hands and knees and playing horsy to your first-born. Come, Julie. I've never asked a favor of you before. Grant me this one."

But Julie only shook his head. "I'm going away, Ben. Time will fix my clock. Don't worry. The mainspring is busted, but the rest of the works are O.K., and I'll be ticking along as per usual if you'll only leave me alone. I want you to have a fighting chance for happiness, too. You go back, and after a while you ask Gloria to marry you. If she accepts you, I'll get a real kick out of being Uncle Julie."

Ben shook him ferociously. "I'm not in love with the woman, you nut."

"You're a liar. It would be no credit to you if you were not. At any rate, I'll never ask her to marry me until you've asked her first. That's final. I might, in a pinch, suck eggs and rob a poor box, but I'll not betray my friend. Final, I tell you. Shut up or we'll have a real quarrel."

Ben Whitton subsided instantly. He knew Julian Grannis, knew the iron that was in that gentle soul. "Very well," he mumbled, "I'll ask her, although that will be fatal. It'll spoil my job as Uncle Ben. But when she has refused me and I cable you that such is the fact, on my word of honor as a gentleman, will you come back and have your innings?"

"Yes, I will. But you've got to make your plan

open and aboveboard. You've got to ask Gloria as if you meant it, as if your heart was in the asking."

"I promise. You're right, Julie. I love her, and if she accepts me I'll marry her if it kills you. But—she'll not. However, the fact remains that I love Gloria just enough to humiliate myself to make her happy. If I can't have her myself, I want her to have you, and that's the milk in the coconut. You make hard rules—I'll play the game—to win."

Julie drew him to his heart. "Good friend," he murmured, "good friend. I often wonder if the love of a man for a woman can ever transcend that of a good friendly man for his friend." His voice choked. "By God, they never hesitate to die for each other, at any rate! Well, Butch, whatever happens, there are years of happiness ahead for both of us. You've certainly been a comfort to me."

CHAPTER XIII

Gloria Justin came into her employer's office in answer to his summons.

"Julie's wife has divorced him and married Brander," he announced. "Got the news while Julie and I were fishing down south."

Gloria's countenance underwent no change. "Does he feel bad?"

"His sense of feminine values is badly upset. He says he will never marry again; that he could never trust another woman; that scientists should be wedded to their jobs, not to women, and he has gone off to Sweden to confer with the world's greatest authority on lightning. As a matter of fact, he does not know what he's talking about."

"Poor Julie! I do hope he'll find happiness."

Whitton shifted in his chair, and cleared his throat. "Well, from now on I'm not going to make his happiness a special order of my business. He'll have to attend to that job himself. Just at present my interest is centered in my own happiness. Gloria, has it ever occurred to you that I am of a marriageable age and that I would make an excellent paterfamilias?"

"It has—frequently, Ben."

Mr. Whitton tapped his desk meditatively with a ruler. "I doubt if I am capable of what the French call the grand passion, Gloria, but in the matter of

solid affection, continuing and increasing through the years, I think I could, with fifty per cent coöperation, be an outstanding success as a husband. You are familiar with my financial condition, which we will admit is steadily on the upgrade. I am not rich enough for a Mercedes Grannis, but a Gloria Justin might be able to put up with me."

He looked bravely into her eyes, his own grown suddenly tender and whimsical. "Has it been any secret to you, my dear Gloria, that for quite a few years I have regarded you with a sentiment decidedly non-fraternal; that, as a matter of fact, I have permitted myself to fall in love with you?"

The girl's glance fell to her hands, nervously twisting in her lap. "It has seemed to me that, on occasions, I—I—detected——"

"Quite so, quite so, Gloria. Well, here's what I want to know: Will you marry me, my dear?"

"No, Ben. You have paid me a very great honor. I'm rather at a loose end in this savage world and you would be an anchor, a protection. And I think I could be reasonably happy with you, Ben, and, perhaps, with the passage of the years, achieve for you an affection sufficiently strong and tender to be—quite—satisfactory to both of us. But——"

"You do not feel that you ought to make the experiment now. Is that it?" His voice was kindly, infinitely gentle. The girl nodded, and he noted her trembling mouth, knew that she would have given much if he had not forced this decision upon her.

"Well, I reckoned that'd be the way when I druv

up," he assured her with a creditable imitation of the Yankee twang in his speech.

She came around the corner of his desk, took his great head in her arms and kissed him on the lips. "It's a very great shame I can't have you, Ben," she whispered. "It's no compliment to you to inform you that you're the runner-up in a dreadful handicap."

He patted her cheek. "Well, whatever happens, don't feel sorry for me," he pleaded, and drew toward him a tray of unanswered correspondence. He skimmed through the letters, apparently oblivious of the presence of the woman who had just refused to marry him.

Suddenly he sat upright. "By the great duck-billed platipus," he cried sharply, "the brass hats of the O. R. N. have definitely decided not to build that branch line into the Columbia River upper basin—at least not until the lumber market has been greatly stabilized and (although they do not say so) until all that vast smear of timber gets out of Jake Brander's hands and into the hands of operators who can be depended upon to play the game with their competitors and not cut prices."

He glanced up at her, malevolent pleasure gleaming in his stern eyes. "Well, thanks first to Mercedes and secondly to ornery, spiteful B. Fido Whitton, Mrs. Jake Brander isn't going to have quite so many millions to spend as she figured on. A big bond house in New York bought a million dollars' worth of Brander Timber Company bonds, which they plan to unload on the public, if they haven't already done so. But The Brander Timber Company, in issuing those bonds, has obligated itself to spend another million or two in the

erection of sawmills, etc. With the O. R. N. reversing its decision to build into that country, Brander's timber will remain inaccessible indefinitely, and the timber for which he paid two dollars per thousand feet stumpage is now worth about seventy-five cents and not salable.

"The bond people will call upon Brander to take up his bonds immediately—a million dollars' worth of them, plus accrued interest—otherwise they will be in the position of having sold bonds under false pretenses and they'll be up to their eyes in trouble. Brander just dare not build his mills and lay out his town sites, because that would be money wasted. And he can't float an additional bond issue, according to his contract with the New York financiers, unless a certain portion of the money is spent to erect sawmills, etc., thus lending additional security to the bond issue. And the financial house has the privilege of voiding the contract if the railroad neglects or refuses, for one year, to build its line.

"Without the railroad Brander can't get his building material in or his manufactured product out—so he'll have to give back the first million! Unless he has a million in ready cash (which I doubt), he'll have to dig it up, and that operation may ruin him. He can't raise it on the timber, because nobody loans money on a frozen asset, no matter how potentially valuable it may be. He'll have to unload other assets, probably at a sacrifice, if news of his financial embarrassment leaks out—and I have a notion old man Robinson and Jim Banning will attend to that detail."

He pondered a moment. "No, Jake will not have to sell other assets. The Hale-Robinson and Banning

crowd will just naturally give him a million dollars for the timber they sold him for two millions; then, if the other lumber manufacturers can be satisfied that Hale-Robinson and Banning can be depended upon to play the game, the O. R. N. will reconsider the situation and build the line.

"Lord, what a clean-up, and poor old Jake giving the party! He'll find himself without much cash on hand and his best properties heavily mortgaged. That will not make him feel very good, will it, Gloria? And you know, my dear, when he reflects that the hot tip his wife gave him caused him to jump in over his head, he'll have something to say to Mercedes. No, married life with those two will never be the same again. . . . I don't like the idea of Hale-Robinson and the Banning crowd coming to this party. . . . I should do something about it . . . yes, by the gods, there's a chance. I'll not dictate any letters just now, Gloria. I've got to do some fast thinking."

An hour later he summoned her. "Take a marconigram to Jacob Brander, aboard S.S. *Niantic,* sailing from New York four days ago for Southampton." He dictated: "Railroad has decided definitely not to build line into your timber stop I hold half million your bonds stop What are you going to do about it?"

He consulted his little black memorandum book.

"Send wire to Julie, Compartment C, Car 362, Overland Limited, leaving this city yesterday at 6 P.M. The message will catch him at Ogden. 'Return immediately or I am a ruined man.' "

"Why, what's happened, Ben?" Gloria demanded.

"Nothing, except that I've just talked to that bond

house in New York and have learned that they haven't unloaded Jake Brander's bonds on the public yet. So I told them I'd take $600,000 worth of them at the market and for them to send the bonds to my bank here and draw on me for the full amount; when I pay the draft the bonds will be delivered to me."

"But those bonds are worthless?"

"Fine to play poker with, Gloria."

"But you haven't any $600,000 to pay for them."

"Julie has. I want him to come back and O.K. my deal. If Julie will supply the cash, I'll supply the business sagacity and ruthlessness and we'll clean up a fortune. With those bonds in our hands, I'll deal direct with Jake Brander and make him dance to my music. He'll settle with me, Gloria, because I'll be chairman of the Bondholders' Protective Committee and the day he defaults on his interest we'll close in on him. Foreclose his deed of trust, you know, given to secure the bonds. Lord, what a large monkey wrench I've thrown into that boy's machinery! His honeymoon is certainly going to be a washout."

It was a month, however, before Ben Whitton had any reaction from Jacob Brander as the result of his marconigram. Unexpectedly one day, Brander telephoned him, requesting an interview at the Palace Hotel.

"Better come to my office, Brander," Whitton replied coldly.

"I would prefer not, Mr. Whitton. I suppose you know why. I prefer to avoid an embarrassing meeting with your partner, Mr. Grannis."

"Grannis is in Sweden."

"I'll be down directly, Mr. Whitton."

Ben Whitton opened his office safe and from the vault extracted bundle after bundle of bonds, which he stacked neatly on his desk.

When Jacob Brander was ushered in, Whitton, wearing what Julie was fond of referring to as "a dead face," sat stolidly behind his desk.

"Sit down!" he said. Jacob Brander hastened to obey. Flushed and embarrassed, he stared at Whitton, who slowly and fatefully tapped with his ruler on the pile of bonds.

"Your worthless Brander Timber Company bonds," he explained. "There are a million dollars' worth—presumably—of this paper, and if you don't believe me, count 'em yourself. I have the entire issue."

"I'll take your word for it, Whitton. What do you want?"

"I want my money back, of course. These bonds aren't worth the paper they're printed on."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm familiar with the terms of the deed of trust your company (which is you) gave to the trustee to secure these bonds. That deed of trust calls for the erection of three sawmills capable of manufacturing five hundred thousand feet of lumber per day; it calls for the establishment of a sinking fund to retire the bonds, for the payment of state and county taxes and federal income taxes. You're not going to make good because you cannot, and if you do not make good, you, as president and sole stockholder of the Brander Timber Company, stand a fat chance of being indicted and convicted for securing money under false

pretenses, of using the United States mails to defraud."

Brander trembled and licked his dry lips.

"You've been to see the president of the O. R. N. in Chicago, I take it," Whitton pursued remorselessly, and Brander nodded. "Well, what's your answer?"

"As you say, I cannot live up to the terms of the deed of trust. The damned railroad pirates have betrayed me."

"You know why. They were forced to, and they could betray you with impunity because they were not legally bound to anybody to build that branch road. You're just the innocent bystander who had been hit and mortally wounded by a stray shot."

"I guess you're right," Brander mumbled. "You've got me where the hair is short. What do you want?"

"Can you continue to meet the interest on these bonds semiannually until such time as the railroad makes your timber accessible? In that event I should regard the bonds as a very good investment, indeed. On the other hand, and as the situation now exists, they have no market value, and if and when you default on the interest, I will have to foreclose, in self-protection. However, if I had my money back, with interest to the date of settlement, I could guarantee you a satisfactory release. Unfortunately, however, six hundred thousand dollars' worth of these bonds belong to my partner, Mr. Grannis, and he, I imagine, will require some exemplary damages. Unfortunately for you, he has no reason to feel kindly toward you, Brander, and he has a small grudge against Mrs.

Brander also. It appears she betrayed a professional secret of his and mine to you—gave you advance information as to the tentative plans of the O. R. N. You acted on that information; you felt that the situation was so secure it removed your huge investment from the field of speculation. That was very unwise."

"I cannot continue to meet the interest. It amounts to sixty thousand dollars a year and I would be most unwise to accept the long chance that the O. R. N. will change its mind and build within a few years and thus reimburse me by reëstablishing the value of my timber. I would merely be inviting myself to go into bankruptcy by paying the interest. No, that plan is impracticable, Mr. Whitton."

"Well, can you dig up enough money to take up these bonds, with accrued interest?"

"Perhaps, if given time. I'll have to sell some of my other properties to raise the money."

"Well, Grannis will be abroad for the next six months, at least, and in the interim his affairs are in my hands. If you manage to meet the first interest payment, you will gain six months' more time. I'll not crowd you or oppress you and force you to sell your assets at a sacrifice, so fly at it, and when you're ready to settle, see me again. If you fail to meet the first interest, a foreclosure suit will follow. That I can guarantee. As for the other suits, you will have to see Julian Grannis. Understand?"

Brander bowed his head, picked up his hat and walked silently out of the office.

Brander returned to his home in Pasadena. "Where is your mistress?" he demanded of the butler when the latter opened the door.

"In her room, sir."

"Tell her I said she is to go to Santa Catalina and remain at the hotel there until I send for her."

He was in his own room, removing his clothes preparatory to bathing, when Mercedes entered. "Jacob," she began, "the butler has delivered your message. It sounded more like an order. May I inquire why you find it necessary to humiliate me so?"

"You may not. You haven't any rights in this house—only a few privileges, and they can be taken away from you," he retorted brutally. "Thanks to your damned-fool information, I am financially ruined."

"Oh, Jacob," she crooned sympathetically, "is it as bad as all that?"

"In all probability it is worse. I'll have to move fast to escape bankruptcy. I must get busy on my accounts at once, and while on that job I can't be bothered with your presence. That late husband of yours holds six hundred thousand dollars of my bonds, and he'll squeeze me until I'm dry and then throw the pieces away."

"He'll not. I know him too well. He is incapable of holding resentment. Let me see him for you, darling. I'll talk to him."

"If I ever met a woman with a perfect case of the swelled head," Brander roared furiously, "you're it. You're so infernally certain you can't go wrong. Use that wooden head of yours, will you? Why should

Grannis, being perfectly cognizant of every move in this rotten railroad deal, put good American money into bonds he knows are worthless, or will eventually be, because they will have no market?"

"Julie always was a fool with money."

"Perhaps, but he has that devil Whitton advising him, and Whitton's no fool. And nobody can tell what an outraged husband will do under such circumstances. Don't stand there gaping at me. Don't try to argue with me. Get out and leave me alone."

She swept grandly out of the room, and when Brander descended to the library, which he used as an office, he plunged at once, with his secretary, into an examination and tabulation of his assets and liabilities. For three days he worked uninterruptedly; then a cool analysis of his condition, made without self-illusion and substantiated by figures that did not lie, proved to him that as a capitalist he had run his course.

He had sufficient resources which, if disposed of, even at a sacrifice, would enable him to raise the million dollars necessary to take up his bond issue and pay the interest to the date when the bonds should be called. But after that—the deluge. He would have nothing left upon which to live. His sole assets would consist, practically, of his stock in the Brander Timber Company, and although its huge holdings were free of debt, he doubted if he could mortgage them to provide funds to pay the taxes on them.

The timber was no longer a frozen asset. On the contrary, it was a red-hot liability! If he held on to it, it would burn his fingers; and since he would lose it in the long run, why (he argued) be fool enough

to attempt to hold on to it at all? Whitton and Grannis held all of the bonds. Well, then, he would default on the first interest payment and let them foreclose on the timber. Of course, they would buy it in for a tithe of the mortgage and then go after his personal assets to satisfy their deficiency judgment. They would strip him. . . . Anybody would. The game was always played that way. Good Lord, he had to stop that! They would put him in jail if he didn't.

Aside from some four hundred thousand dollars in short-term loans at various banks, he owned nothing in the way of floating indebtedness. Well, he would have to settle with the banks. If he did not, they would settle, anyhow, by throwing him into involuntary bankruptcy. . . . Well, if he settled with Whitton and Grannis by giving them a quitclaim deed to the timber he had purchased from the Hale-Robinson gang and the Bannings, and permit them to foreclose on his original holdings, they might call off their dogs . . . bright idea, that. Saw off his red-hot liability on them . . . yes, he'd burn them good and deep before he got through with them. . . . He doubted if they could continue to raise sufficient money to pay the taxes on the property and hold it as an investment. Frankenstein monster, that damned timber. Eat a man up.

Well, he'd try out his scheme, at any rate, and if it worked he would then liquidate. After paying his bank loans, he would have in the neighborhood of half a million dollars left, which he would invest in good bonds . . . bring him five per cent—twenty-five thousand dollars a year . . . have to taper down on his

style of living . . . not enough for two. Two? Why the devil two? Since the day Ben Whitton's marconigram had been delivered to him aboard the *Niantic,* Mercedes had been a weeping, sniveling, complaining, protesting, shivering, apprehensive nuisance, alternating in defying him and endeavoring to work her way with him by tears, cajoleries, sophistries. . . . If he continued to live with her, she'd drive him crazy . . . no, twenty-five thousand dollars a year was not enough for two to live on, but in Paris a single man might manage very handsomely on that sum. . . . Yes, that was the thing to do. Go to Paris and remain there. Chuck her. If she sued him for a divorce for desertion and the judge awarded her alimony, let her try to collect it. He'd be in Paris, far from the court's jurisdiction. He'd have his bonds in Paris and if she came to Paris and sued him there he'd pop over to London and laugh at her. . . . It costs money to travel, so he wouldn't leave her any money. Let her sue him here, in due course. No need to worry about Mercedes. No trouble for her to land some other boob with a bankroll. Trust her. She knew her way about. Meanwhile she could fiddle for a living . . . damned fool, with her false-alarm tip on that railroad project. . . .

He went to San Francisco and called upon Ben Whitton, who raised his dead face as Brander came in and murmured morosely, "Well, Brander?"

"I'm done in, Whitton. I want to settle with you. Got to. I guaranteed those bonds personally. Had to do that to give them added stability until the Brander Timber Company's sawmills were in operation, other-

wise I couldn't have got the million. And I needed it to buy the Hale-Robinson and Banning timber."

"I see. You want to get out of the way of a possible suit on a deficiency judgment, in which case, of course, your personal assets would be attached to satisfy said judgment."

"That's the case in a nutshell. I want to escape with something out of the wreck.

"You surrender those bonds to the trustee and nullify that deed of trust and I'll turn over to you all of the capital stock of the Brander Timber Company. I want a clean bill of health and I'm willing to pay for it."

"Sold!" Ben Whitton murmured without enthusiasm. "Let's go down to my bank and put the whole business in escrow before you change your mind. The situation is as clear as mud. No lawsuits of any nature whatsoever and the entire issue of the Brander Timber Company stock as and for agreed liquidated damages?"

"How about Grannis?"

"I have his power of attorney to act for him in any manner I may see fit. Come on. Let's go."

They went.

Later, Mr. Benjamin Whitton sat on his spine in his swivel chair, with his tremendous legs on top of his desk, and gazed out his office window across the roofs of the old gray town to the ferryboats, darting like giant water beetles across San Francisco Bay.

Presently the door opened, and Gloria Justin came in. Mr. Whitton did not turn. The girl stood an appreciable moment looking at him, then spoke:

"Ben."

"Yes, Gloria."

"I have something to say to you, Ben. Something very important."

"Fire away."

"I'm resigning from your employ."

"Jake with me, Gloria. I'm for liberty. Mind telling me why you're leaving old B. Fido in the lurch?"

"It's a little embarrassing to be in your employ, Ben. I've tried to dodge it, but no can do. I've secured another position in New York and I'm going to it on the first of next month."

"Well, that isn't such a long way off. Not any more. I suppose you'd like to have a rest before proceeding to New York."

"Yes, I thought so"—faintly, a trifle tremulously.

Mr. Whitton essayed the chorus of Ramona and failed miserably. "Can't get that song out of my head," he complained. "Guess I'll quit trying. I was in a fair way of conquering my ambition to play that song until I heard no less a person than Mercedes Grannis Brander rip through it last night."

"Ben! Where?"

"At a small neighborhood motion-picture theater. Sometimes, when I haven't anything better to do, I gather up a passel of kids in my block and go to the movies. Well, last night, Mercedes was there, doing her trick fiddling and doing it pretty well, too. She's changed her name. Known professionally as Mercedes Lindberg."

"Her maiden name, Ben. Poor Mercedes. And she's come to that?"

"Lucky to have it to come to, says old Ben Whit-

ton. I've ascertained that Brander has sold his home in Pasadena. He had an eighty-foot motor yacht he couldn't sell, but it's for sale now by a broker. Mercedes has sued him for non-support and has attached the yacht. Guess he's deserted her, because he's in Europe."

"How does Mercedes look?"

"She was wearing a black velvet dress Julie bought her. A princess effect, I think it's called. Spangles on it. I imagine she's making about thirty dollars a week."

"Oh, Ben, how dreadful!"

"Pretty severe handicap, I admit—until she gets rid of Jake for desertion. And she'll have to wait a year for that, because for this time she cannot afford to establish a ninety-day residence in Reno and hire high-priced attorneys. I hear the Reno legal lights rather harpoon folks who come there for the cure. So the going will be tough on Mercedes for a year or two; after that I wouldn't be surprised to see her marry some acrobat or juggler. She's certainly not hard to look at."

"Have you heard from Julie lately?"

"Yes, had a message from him to-day."

"Anything you could tell me, Ben?"

"Alas, no! Just that he's coming home and should be popping in on us any moment. The medicine's working good this time. One of those old telepathy messages, that's all, but stronger than ever." He looked at his watch. "He was due in town at two-thirty, if his train wasn't late. It's now exactly three. Ah, there he is, and rapping at the door of my private

office, as usual. Open up, Gloria, and let our wandering boy in."

"You let him in yourself," the girl cried spiritedly, and fled to her own office. So Ben had to open the door himself. Julie stood on the threshold.

"Welcome back to Papa," roared Mr. Whitton and folded his friend in a bearlike hug. "Come in and set."

"Where's Gloria?" Julie demanded.

"Oh, Gloria quit some time ago. We decided it wasn't proper for a lady about to be married to work for me—for us—any more."

Julie swallowed hard—once; then his hand reached out for Ben's. "So I was right, wasn't I?" he said in a voice that lacked enthusiasm. "I knew if I stayed away a year you'd get the chance you were entitled to. When are you gaing to be married, Ben?"

"Married, you ass? I'm not even engaged."

"You mean to tell me you haven't asked Gloria?"

"Young man, you know me well enough to know that I always keep my promises. I asked her and got an emphatic no."

"But—but—why did she quit?"

"For two reasons: To avoid my dead face and broken heart and to escape you. The girl has spirit and pride, and would be the last person on earth to hang around where you could find her, on the extremely off chance that you might propose to her. So she got herself another job. In New York."

"Have you her New York address?"

"I have not."

"Oh, Ben."

"You aren't figuring on getting married again, are you?"

"Don't be dull, Ben. Of course I am."

"Hurrah for our side! Why, bless your old mildewed heart! You've recovered, haven't you? No fun being a misanthrope, is it? And you have recovered your lost faith in women? Remarkable!"

"I never doubted Gloria."

"Well, God knows she's doubted you, and with good cause. But before you think of marriage, suppose you ask me if you've got anything left to get married on. Remember, you turned over six hundred thousand dollars of Uncle Jarlath's money to me without a receipt and gave me carte blanche to play ducks and drakes with it."

Julie smiled wanly. "There must have been a few ducklings as a result, Butch. I haven't worried. I've been having a good time. Know more about lightning than I used to, and landed myself a fine job in this country taking charge of an experimental plant. Don't have to equip my own. Great news, eh, Butch?"

"No, bad news. You do not have to go to work for anybody, old son. Your time, for the future, is going to be occupied entirely seeking profitable investments for your money."

Julie sat down very abruptly and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"It's a sad story, Julie. When the O. R. N. decided not to build and for the reasons given me by Gruber, I knew, or rather felt, that Jake Brander was sunk without a trace and that old man Robinson and Jim Banning planned to sit quietly by until the bondholders

foreclosed, when they would buy the property in, fix things up with the Northwestern Fir Association, who would withdraw their threat of an embargo on shipments over the O. R. N. and permit the O. R. N. to build the branch line. I had a vision of those two birds splitting a wonderfully ripe melon between them, and I longed to have a slice myself. I figured I had advance information of the decision of the O. R. N. not to build, so I telephoned to Booth, Kunze & Morrow, the New York bankers who financed a million dollars' worth of Brander's bonds.

"I introduced myself over the telephone and gave them bank references; then I informed them of the decision of the O. R. N. not to build and that this decision gave them the opportunity to abrogate their contract with Brander. I advised them to verify my report and warned them that although Brander had guaranteed the bonds personally, his guarantee might not be worth much. Until he should default on his payment of the first semiannual interest payment, nobody could prevent him from liquidating his personal assets, sequestrating the money and trotting off to Europe to escape a summons in a suit to enforce his guarantee.

"I reminded them that the security for the bonds was now a badly frozen asset, that there would be no market for the bonds at any price, that the first interest payment would, in all probability, be defaulted and Booth, Kunze & Morrow's reputation might suffer considerably as a result of marketing the bonds.

"Well, it seems the first bond issue had not been sold, and I offered to buy six hundred thousand dollars'

worth of them, with my eyes open, provided they would contract with me to sell me the remaining four hundred thousand dollars' worth within one year at par. So we fixed up a deal, and after you returned from Ogden and gave me carte blanche to go ahead and use your money, which I did, I had the entire bond issue under my control.

"Well, Jake Brander came back, looked the situation over, had a talk with me and decided he couldn't possibly liquidate and make his get-away before defaulting on the first interest payment. He realized I was watching him, so, in desperation, and in order to save something out of the wreck, he voluntarily turned over to me all of the capital stock of the Brander Timber Company and gave me six months in which to do one of two things: return the Brander Timber Company stock to him and keep the bonds, or return the bonds to him, release the trust deed and hold him harmless against suits of any nature whatsoever.

"Julie, your Uncle Ben had to move quickly. The first thing he did was to form a new corporation entitled the Columbia River Basin Lumber Company and transfer to it all of the assets of the Brander Timber Company. You see, I didn't want that fellow's name associated with any enterprise I was fathering. Then I had the Columbia River Basin Lumber Company, of which all of the stock except qualifying shares for a dummy board of directors stood in my name, elect me president.

"That accomplished, I had some nice letterheads printed and wrote a letter to the Northwestern Fir Association, pleading to be permitted to join it and

share in its benefits. Of course, none of the directors knew who I was and they were curious to find out, so I was invited to attend an unofficial meeting of its directorate and show my hand, which I did. They didn't think they'd elect me to membership until they had talked it over, for they figured Jake Brander was still to be reckoned with and that I was merely his stalking horse.

"So I told them I wasn't greatly interested; that if the O. R. N. didn't build a branch line into my timber I'd build the branch line myself to connect with the O. R. N.'s tracks and as common carriers the railroad couldn't refuse the freight I offered. I told them too that if they forced me to do this I'd cut the lumber market to strings and ribbons. They didn't know I was bluffing, so, of course, that was a horse of a different color, and we commenced talking business. We didn't really get together, however, until their investigations proved that Jake Brander had liquidated and gone to Europe and until I proved, by my escrow documents and assurances from the New York bankers, that I really owned all that timber.

"Then, among the members of the Northwestern Fir Association, I formed a syndicate and, with Jim Banning and old man Robinson as bellwethers to head the flock, I sold control of the Columbia River Basin Lumber Company. With the cash received I paid for the remaining four hundred thousand dollars' worth of bonds, released the deed of trust and made a bonfire of all the documents in the case. I sold the control on the basis of two dollars a thousand feet stumpage and the minority holding is our velvet and should, in

years to come, be worth a couple of millions additional. The other fellows are satisfied because they now control a situation which, under Jake Brander's management, threatened to be awful."

"What did you do about our hydroelectric proposition?"

"Oh, before I sold out the control I deeded all that watershed to you and me. The timber I retained; hence the alienation of the hydroelectric possibilities had no effect on the other deal. And I have since, on the strength of Baum's patent, sold the hydroelectric end of our deal for a million in cash and a twenty per cent interest in the company. For my wisdom and energy, I take half the profits. For your faith in me and some money loaned to our enterprise, without security, you take the other half."

"Ben," Julie breathed admiringly, "you're a marvel. How can I ever thank you? Nevertheless, I'm going to take that job. That's my life job, and I'll never be happy unless I work at it."

"Very well, Thor. Thor was the thunder god, wasn't he? Well, happiness lies wherever you find it, and if you're fast on your feet, old son, you'll find about one hundred and thirty pounds of it running down the hall toward the elevator." He leaped to the door and threw it open. "Scat!" he cried, and Julie scatted and overtook Gloria at the elevator.

"Why, Julie," she cried, and held out her hand to him, for it would never do (she concluded) to let him know she was running away. He took her hand and, without replying to her greeting, drew her forcibly

back into Ben's office. And when he got her there he said:

"Gloria, I have something to say to you."

"Anything private, Julie?" Ben Whitton queried casually.

"There's nothing too private in my life for you to listen to, Butch. I'm going to ask Gloria to marry me."

Ben Whitton pounded his desk. "Meeting will come to order," he announced. "A motion is before the house. Brother Grannis has moved that Sister Justin marry him. Do I hear a second to that motion? I do. I second it myself. It is regularly moved and seconded that Miss Gloria Justin be and she is hereby engaged to marry Mr. Julian Grannis. All present will signify their assent by saying 'Aye.' "

"Aye!" Julie cried softly.

Ben Whitton waited a moment. "There appears to be a deadlock," he announced gravely. "I'll wait ten seconds for the deadlock to be broken and if not so broken, the chairman, by virtue of the authority vested in him, will cast the deciding vote."

Gloria turned to him with streaming eyes. "Oh, Ben, you dear, sweet, understanding, maddening man," she cried, and rushed into his arms. He kissed her fraternally and said: "Uncle Ben casts the deciding vote."

So Julie claimed his own at last, a bit shamefacedly it must be admitted, but none the less authoritatively. Nevertheless, when Gloria had sealed the compact after the time-honored fashion, she came back into Ben

Whitton's ursine embrace and drew his large red right ear down to her lips. "Julie and I are going to have more than enough for two simple people to live on in luxury, Ben dear," she whispered. "I want you to arrange to do something for Mercedes. Use your own judgment, dear friend. Whatever you do will please Julie. He can't hold grudges, you know. I understand him. She'll always be his responsibility, and it would hurt him to think of her—in distress."

"I—always—knew you were fine," he murmured, "but never until now have I known—how—fine you are. I'll attend to that—ah—matter."

He stood in the center of the room looking at them as the door closed behind them. Old Uncle Ben, the friend of the family. Yes, he was the sort of man who could with consummate grace pay the fiddler!

THE END

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